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Principal Perceptions as Literacy Leaders  
at High-Need Elementary Schools

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Janet M. Lear

March 2017

Advisor: Kristina Hesbol, PhD

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Title: Principal Perceptions as Literacy Leaders at High-Need Elementary Schools

Advisor: Kristina Hesbol, PhD

Degree Date: March 2017

### **Abstract**

This dissertation study explores the perceptions of principals as literacy leaders and the enactment of these perceptions in high-need elementary schools. Literacy leadership, as perceived by principals, was analyzed based on interview data from six participants. Individual cases were studied for the unique characterizations each participant brought to the construct of literacy leadership through their own lived experience. Cross-case analysis was conducted in order to draw out themes among participants. Conclusions suggest that there are commonalities among principals' perceptions and enactments as literacy leaders in high-need elementary schools.

Participants focused on: adoption of literacy programs and curricular fidelity; data use for reflective practice; building cultures of high expectations; distributed leadership models for improved literacy instruction; and professional development to support language arts instruction. Particular aspects of literacy leadership, such as literacy engagement and family-literacy school connections, were not as great a focus in participant interviews.

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank my husband for all of his support over the years and his encouragement throughout this dissertation process.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Sustainable leadership doesn't equivocate. It puts learning at the center of everything leaders do (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 27).

The debate over how to best teach literacy, and especially reading, has been ongoing in the United States for over 150 years. During that time, a great deal has been learned about what has and has not worked in literacy instruction. Reading instruction has been a main focus of national reform efforts for five decades (Allington, 2012). However, battles over how to teach reading, termed the “Reading Wars,” have created a pendulum effect to curriculum and instruction during these decades of reform. Slavin (2002) describes this sort of educational change process as the “pendulum swings of taste characteristic of the art of fashion (think hemlines) rather than the progressive improvements characteristic of science and technology” (p. 16).

Unfortunately, the main constituents who have lost due to the Reading Wars are students in schools with educational professionals who do not have the pedagogical background to know what is necessary and important to learning how to read. Reading is a foundational skill for most subjects in the school curriculum, and literacy issues are a pivotal reason for low academic achievement. Children with reading deficits oftentimes end up in a spiral of lower self-esteem and disengagement with school (Chhabra and McCardle, 2004). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has listed reading disabilities

and the inability to read as a national health risk based on the impact poor reading performance and illiteracy has on quality of life.

Poor scores in reading usually plague schools that do not meet adequate yearly progress (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2007; Duke, 2010). The attempt to close the reading opportunity gap for students from socioeconomically stressed backgrounds, while continuing to raise the reading achievement of all students, has been a central focus of state and national public education agendas. Yet, the opportunity gap continues to exist between those students who are exposed to impactful instruction in reading and those who are not.

Within the last decade, a tremendous amount of research literature has been written and numerous statistical formulas have been created to measure the value-added of teachers based on studies that focused on teachers as the single most important factor in a student's academic experience. While very few would argue against the central importance of teachers in student achievement, in schools that have consistently struggled to produce academic gains, a system-wide approach is needed. Based on their review of the ways leadership influences student learning, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) conclude:

While the evidence shows small but significant effects of leadership actions on student learning across the spectrum of schools, existing research also shows that demonstrated effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances. Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. (p. 5)

Caldwell (2006) asserts that principals play a pivotal role in reading achievement within schools. Senge (1990) defines leverage as “seeing where actions and changes in structures can lead to significant, enduring improvements” (p. 114). Supporting principals to become literacy leaders is a leverage point that holds great promise for increasing reading achievement.

This case study will examine and describe elementary school principals’ perceptions of their role in supporting literacy learning in high-need schools. By elucidating principals’ perceptions of literacy leadership and how they negotiate this role in the context of their work, more focused efforts can be made to support principals to become instructional leaders in literacy learning. Such information can inform the pre-service and in-service development of principals in the area of literacy leadership.

The International Literacy Association (ILA) defines literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context” (2015). The ILA further describes the importance of literacy:

The ability to read, written, and communicate connects people to one another and empowers them to achieve things they never thought possible. Communication and connection are the basis of who we are and how we live together and interact with the world. (<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/why-literacy>)

For the purposes of this dissertation study, I refer to literacy as a system of oral and written communication, commonly defined as the language arts in the context of schools.

There are number of ways that the term “high-need” is used in reference to schools. For the purpose of this study, I define a high-need school as one that qualifies for

Title I funds as a schoolwide program based on Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education). High-need schools are often characterized by such challenges as limited academic performance on achievement tests and low levels of expectations for students and communities (Portin et al., 2009). In addition, high-need schools are commonly in a situation where there is a widespread sense of demoralization among seasoned teachers and high attrition of new ones (Karp, 2014; Payne, 2008).

### **Research Questions**

The questions that guide this research are:

How do principals of high-need elementary schools perceive their role as a literacy leader?

How do principals of high-need elementary schools describe their actions to improve literacy learning?

### **Rationale**

#### **Principals as Agents of Reform**

Effective principal leadership acts as a catalyst for school change (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). Based on their meta-analysis of over 70 research studies of leadership practices, the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) found a significant, positive correlation between school achievement and effective school leadership (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). A number of studies indicate that, through their daily interactions with faculty and school management, principals are essential to the successful implementation of reform initiatives (Bryk, Sebring,

Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Kurki, Boyle, & Aladjem, 2006; Marsh, Hamilton, & Gill, 2008; Seashore, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). In addition, principals play a key role in the outcomes of school reform (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Fullan, 1991; Hall & Hord, 1987; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996).

Bryk et al. (2010) describe leadership as the “driving subsystem for improvement” and state:

Effective instructional leadership makes broad demands on principals’ knowledge and skills with regard to both student and teacher learning. Principals must be knowledgeable, for instance, about the tenets of learning theory and curriculum. They must be able to analyze instruction and provide effective, formative feedback to teachers. Moreover, principals must be able to articulate high standards for student learning and support teachers’ innovations to reach these standards. Their work should be guided routinely by a constant focus on evidence of student learning gleaned through data reports and regular visits to classrooms. (p. 63)

Research indicates that school principals significantly impact the academic achievement of students (Cotton, 2003; Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Rice, 2010). A number of researchers have suggested that improvement of teaching and learning is unlikely to occur without effective school leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005).

Particular principal characteristics have been associated with increased student achievement, specifically a consistent and central focus on student learning, high value on teacher learning, and a focus on staff development that meets teacher needs (Dinham,

2005; Marks & Printy, 2003; Quint, Akey, Rappaport, & Willner, 2007; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). In schools where principals received high ratings for instructional leadership, Marsh et al. (2008) found that students scored 0.7 standard deviations higher in reading and 0.6 standard deviations higher math than did students in schools where principals received lower ratings. In regard to professional development (PD) focused directly on classroom instruction, Quint et al. (2007) found a positive association between principal involvement in teacher PD increased implementation of the content of PD, and gains in reading and mathematics achievement.

Principals can be considered “street-level bureaucrats” in that they negotiate how policies are enacted in the school and classroom (Lipsky, 1980, p. 13). Because principals usually have greater access to policy messages through attendance at district meetings, state directives, and networking events, they heavily shape how educational policy is enacted in their schools through the choices they make about which messages are disseminated to teachers and what is emphasized or not included in the message (Coburn, 2005). The working knowledge of literacy learning that principals bring each day to their school is an important factor in students’ daily experiences of literacy learning and whether this experience provides quality opportunities to grow in their literacy development.

Acknowledging the importance of principals as literacy leaders, the ILA (2010) specifies standards targeted at administrator candidates. Included in these standards are the ability to: recognize major theories and research evidence related to literacy development and instruction; identify evidence-based instructional approaches,

techniques, and procedures relevant to the literacy demands of preK-12 instruction; and examine practices contributing to applied knowledge of reading education. Effective literacy instruction necessitates that school leaders, as well as teachers, have a deep understanding of the various components of literacy learning, including but not limited to: constructivist learning theory; children's literature and reader response; assessment-based instruction; emergent literacy; phonological awareness; phonics; comprehension, and the writing process (Cowen, 2003).

### **Enactment of Reading Philosophies**

Every school has a philosophy of literacy learning, whether it is consciously chosen or not. Principals and teachers may not be able to explicate this theory, but their everyday actions demonstrate the assumptions made about how the language arts should be taught, the values behind these assumptions, and the ways that educational policies are implemented. Sensemaking theorists aver that action is grounded in how people select information, interpret information, and act on those interpretations (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1995).

School and classroom practices are the result of the "micro-momentary actions" of teachers and other school personnel, which are based on preexisting cognitive frameworks (Porac et al., 1989). Kennedy (1982) refers to these frameworks as working knowledge, defined as "the organized body of knowledge that [people] use spontaneously and routinely in the context of their work. It includes the entire array of beliefs, assumptions, interests, and experiences that influence the behavior of individuals at work" (Kennedy, 1982, pp. 193-194).



Individuals and groups are influenced by prior knowledge and the social context within which they work as they implement curriculum, instruction, and policy (Porac et al., 1989; Vaughan, 1996; Weick, 1995). It is important for school faculty to uncover their own working knowledge about literacy learning in order to recognize the effect these networks of ideas and values have on the literacy development of students. In the absence of an epistemological basis for understanding literacy learning and how students best learn to read, write, and communicate, many United States schools have consistently failed to effectively teach reading and other communication skills.

Too often, a curricular program is purchased, and it becomes the de facto literacy philosophy for the school. Allington (2002) observes:

But it is the absence of expertise—let’s call it naiveté— that leads teachers and administrators to hope upon hope that a new reading series or new intervention program will solve all their woes. It is a sad day when school administrators flaunt their limited expertise about teaching— their naiveté— and publicly announce the purchase of a “proven program.” (p. 17)

Schools that lack a solid knowledge of reading theory and the underlying values of particular theories buy their philosophy of literacy from an educational publishing company, the assumption being that a published curriculum, as a stand-alone approach, is sufficient to ensure adequate progress in literacy.

There are a flaws to this assumption. One flaw is that all curricula are founded on research in best practices in literacy instruction. Without a sound understanding of literacy pedagogy, educational professionals are unable to judge whether the lessons and activities of a curriculum are actually based on best practices in literacy instruction. A second flaw is that literacy programs present straightforward directions for what should

be taught within the time allotted for language arts. The reality is that literacy programs are oftentimes a smorgasbord of activities that could not possibly all be covered within a given language arts period or school year. Hence, choices must be made, and sound choices need to be based on professional knowledge about literacy instruction.

Educational professionals, who do not have an understanding as to why a particular activity is to be carried out, are unable to judge whether the activity is best suited for their students at a given point in students' learning trajectories. Principals and teachers, alike, can be guided down the wrong path of literacy instruction by ineffective curricula or ineffective methods of carrying out curriculum.

### **Outcomes of Major Reform Efforts**

A crucial consideration in looking at efforts to increase literacy achievement in schools is the degree to which previous reform initiatives have produced substantive positive changes in the past. Large-scale reform efforts, such as Title 1, have produced mixed results (Borman & D'Agostino, 1996). Statistical analyses indicate that Reading First, a major federally funded initiative focused on improving the reading skills of K-3 students, produced inconsistent results in reading achievement (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008). A question educational leaders must ask themselves is, why are these initiatives falling short of substantial student achievement gains?

In order to explicate the issues inherent in the failure of literacy reforms, we must look to analyses of similar efforts that have failed across the educational landscape. For instance, the Cross City Campaign for Urban Reform network conducted a three-year qualitative study of large-scale instructional reform movements in Chicago, Milwaukee,

and Seattle, focusing on the relationship of district/school interactions and why these initiatives failed in producing academic gains (Cross City Campaign for Urban Reform, 2005). Among the conclusions of this report were that school personnel did not view the educational initiatives as being directly linked to instruction (Cross City Campaign for Urban Reform, 2005). The Cross City report concluded that, while the reform initiatives appeared to prioritize instruction, the focus on standards, assessment, and leadership responsibilities were removed from the actual work of the classroom. In reviewing the conclusions of the Cross City report, Fullan (2006) asserts that the standards-based, district-wide reform initiatives in these cities failed due to a lack of focus on the “black box of instructional practice in the classroom” (p. 5).

Hence, an important consideration in looking at how to effectively improve literacy instruction and achievement is to ascertain the degree to which reform efforts are actually enacted in the classroom. PD targeted at teachers is the most common means of attempting to influence instructional practices in order to increase literacy achievement. Yet empirical research indicates that traditional PD has minimal transference to instructional improvement or gains in student achievement (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Ball and Cohen (1999) have argued that PD aimed at teacher effectiveness needs to target the practical contexts of teachers.

As national and state governments legislate policies with the goal of increased student achievement, classroom instruction should be the central focus for school improvement. Elmore (2004) highlights the crucial factor of context in making changes

within the classroom, asserting that teachers most effectively learn to make instructional changes in “the setting in which they work” (p. 3). In his critique on strategic planning and whole-school reform, Schmoker (2004) emphasizes that, “actual practice must adjust and respond to ground-level complexities that can't be precisely anticipated at the beginning of the year; it must adapt to the results of specific strategies that cannot be conceived in advance” (p. 430).

### **Principals as Literacy Leaders**

Movement toward the view of principals as instructional leaders and away from the view of principals as general managers has been slow. Senge (1990) defines mental models as the “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (p. 8) and observes that “new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking” (p. 174). Even though there is a substantial body of research to support principal instructional leadership, for many schools the notion of the principal as an academic front-runner will require the creation of a new mental model of the principals’ role that moves counter to the notion of the principal as a manager. This, in turn, will require an organizational shift in the daily interactions of principals within schools.

While some would argue that principals cannot be academic experts in every subject, I suggest that the one area where it is most crucial for elementary school principals to be experts is literacy learning. Literacy is a series of processes and skills used throughout the school day in many other subjects. Given the reliance on literacy as a

learning and communication tool, schools that want to make gains in achievement cannot afford to employ principals who lack knowledge about how to effectively develop these skills. Burch and Spillane (2003) assert:

Subject matter is an important variable in the reform choices of elementary school leaders. Elementary school leaders are not generalists. The challenges that their faculties encounter in improving instruction can differ among subjects. In supporting teachers in changing their practices, elementary school leaders view the challenges and opportunities of instructional reform through subject-specific lenses. Examining these views (how they are enacted and how they shift) is central to improving school leadership and especially instructional leadership. (p. 534)

Another argument against the responsibility of principals as literacy leaders is that literacy coaches should fulfill that role. However, many schools do not have literacy coaches. For those schools that do have literacy coaches, significant correlations were found between increased involvement of teachers with the reading coach and principals who treated the reading coach as a valued professional ( $r = .53$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and were actively engaged in the coaching program ( $r = .70$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (Matsumura et al., 2009). This study signifies that principals who play a key role in valuing literacy efforts are effective in spreading that sense of value to the rest of the school staff.

Rather than considering it unnecessary for principals to be literacy leaders in schools that have literacy coaches, it would be more academically profitable to recognize the important role principals play in lending legitimacy to the work of literacy coaches through an aligned partnership. Lewis-Specter and Jay make note of the changing role of reading specialists and literacy coaches in schools, including “including rising expectations for reading specialists to influence not only individual students and teachers,

but also school-wide reading performance and programming” (2011, p. 9). Principals can use this role, where it exists in schools, to build collaborative leadership through which reading specialists and literacy coaches have more direct involvement with coaching teachers. Kral (2012) observes the reality that “a distant relationship between the principal and the coach sends a message of low priority, which results in teachers’ opting out of the intended reform” (p. 1). Survey research conducted by Selvaggi (2016) found that principals identified the collaborative relationship between the literacy coach and themselves as very important. The sole responsibility of literacy should not be placed on one individual, such as a literacy coach, if a school is to increase reading achievement schoolwide. It is just not possible in most schools for one literacy coach to make a system-wide difference without the active engagement of the entire staff with the principal in the lead.

With high expectations for principals as literacy leaders, principals need support if they are to fulfill this role. More research is needed on principals’ perceptions as literacy leaders. As well, this research needs to delve into the ways that principals enact these perceptions in their daily work within schools. Because of the pressing need for increased literacy achievement especially in high-need schools, this study will focus on schools in the most need of highly effective literacy leaders.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Very little research has been conducted on principals’ perceptions and self-efficacy as they perform their role as academic leaders of literacy instruction. Bandura (2006) points out that perceived self-efficacy is “not a global trait but a differentiated set

of self-beliefs linked to a distinct realm of functioning” (2006, p. 307) and that there is “no all-purpose measure of perceived self-efficacy” (2006, p. 307). Consequently, more general or global self-efficacy measures may have very low predictive value because the items are not specific to a particular function (Bandura, 2006).

A principal may have high self-efficacy related to certain overarching managerial functions in a school but have low self-efficacy about how to help teachers to improve literacy learning within their classrooms. Literacy learning relies upon expert competencies based on a sophisticated system of knowledge as to what is needed with particular students at a given point in the continuum of literacy development. Given the fact that expert competencies are founded upon very specific and structured systems of knowledge (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988; Sternberg & Horvath, 1999), more research needs to be conducted that focuses directly on principals’ views of themselves as literacy leaders.

### **Conclusion**

By providing a thick description of the perceptions of principals as instructional leaders of literacy learning, I seek to spotlight an issue that has received considerably little focus in the vast body of research and literature on educational leadership. Reeves (2008) states that “if school leaders really believe that literacy is a priority, then they have a personal responsibility to understand literacy instruction, define it for their colleagues, and observe it daily” (p. 91). The microcosm of the classroom is the locus of control for student achievement, and principals need to delve into the space where instruction and learning meet in order to understand the real changes that must take place to propel

literacy progress in high-need schools, where wasted moments are costly to children who need all of the advantages a solid foundation in literacy can afford.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Balanced literacy*: an approach that brings together aspects of top-down and bottom-up approaches.

*Bottom-up approaches to reading*: a focus on the printed page and how readers extract information; also referred to as “part-to-whole,” because of its initial focus on a linear process from smaller units to sentences and meaning.

*Cloze procedure*: a technique in which words are strategically deleted from a passage, requiring students to fill in the blanks; assesses comprehension, ability to use context, vocabulary, and grammar use.

*Coaching*: models of support for teachers that bring effective practices into classrooms through constructivist methods.

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*: academic standards in English Language Arts and mathematics that were developed under the oversight of the Council of Chief State School Officers and adopted by numerous states in the United States from 2011-2015.

*Comprehension*: the ability to make meaning from the reading of narrative and expository texts.

*Concepts of print*: awareness of basic literacy concepts related to reading and writing, such as: capital and lower case letters; punctuation; reading from top to bottom; one-to-one matching; and words convey a message.



*Development Reading Assessment (DRA)*: an individually administered, criterion-referenced reading assessment requiring students to read a passage and retell the passage in order to the student's instructional and independent level or reading.

*Diacritical marks*: symbols added to alphabet letters that indicate pronunciation of the specific sound the letter makes in a particular word.

*Dual Language program*: a program that incorporates two languages in the education of students in order to teach content and literacy with the goal of maintaining the primary language of emergent bilingual students and/or teaching a second language to monolingual students.

*Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)*: a diagnostic assessment of five early literacy skills: phonemic awareness; alphabetic principle; accurate and fluent reading; vocabulary; and comprehension.

*Early childhood education (ECE)*: Programs to develop the academic and socio-emotional needs of children in their preschool years.

*Emergent bilingual students*: students who are learning a second language with the goal that they will be proficient in their first and second language.

*English as a Second Language (ESL)*: English language development services provided to emergent bilingual students or students who speak English as a second language.

*English Language Acquisition Program*: a program developed specifically by one district in this study in order to comply with a federal consent decree; services are provided to English Language Learners in order to transition them to the district's mainstream English instruction classroom.

*English Language Learners*: students whose are learning English as a second language; a term generally used to denote students who are moving toward English language usage as a primary means of communication.

*Fluency*: the ability to read at an adequate pace with word accuracy and prosody.

*Graphophonic cueing system*: the use of knowledge of letters and sounds to decode texts.

*Guided reading*: small group work conducted by a teacher or education professional with students at similar instructional levels in reading; provides support and instruction for students at their zone of proximal development.

*High-need school*: a school that qualifies to use Title I funds as a schoolwide program based on Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education).

*Interactive theory*: a theory that readers construct meaning from text by attending to various cues (graphophonic, morphemic, syntactic, and semantic systems) to a greater or lesser extent depending on the need to focus on a particular type of cue.

*International Baccalaureate (IB) World school*: a school authorized to provide a primary years program curriculum focused on the whole child and specifically designed to prepare students as caring, lifelong learners who are able to participate in the world around them.

*Literacy*: the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context (International Literacy Association, 2015).

*Naturalistic Generalization*: a reader's generalizations, made based on readings of case study research, that occur when new conceptions from case study descriptions are added to prior knowledge of the phenomenon.

*Morphemic cueing system*: the use of meaningful units of words to decode and gain an understanding of the meaning of a word.

*Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments*: assessments designed to measure the academic achievement of students in English/Language Arts and mathematics based on the Common Core State Standards.

*Phonemic awareness*: the ability to separate sounds with the objective of mapping the sounds to letter.

*Phonics*: the ability to map sounds onto letters.

*Response to Intervention (RTI)*: an approach to ensuring provision of instruction and interventions that match student need, monitor student progress, and make decisions based on student data.

*Running record*: a diagnostic reading tool that identifies patterns in student's reading through the student reading of a book at their approximate level while an examiner records reading miscues or deviations from the text.

*Science of Reading*: a term that is used to define reading in five components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension.

*Semantic cueing system*: the use of background knowledge and schema to decode and comprehend texts.

*Syntactic cueing system*: the use of sentence structure to decode and comprehend texts.

*Tier 1 instruction:* core high-quality, scientifically-based instruction through which all students are ensured a quality education in order to eliminate referrals to special education based on inadequate instruction.

*Tier 2 instruction:* delivery of more intensive instruction for students who are not making adequate progress through Tier 1 instruction.

*Tier 3 instruction:* individualized instruction that provides intensive interventions based on the student's specific needs.

*Top-down approaches to reading:* a focus on linguistic knowledge to form hypotheses and make predictions about the words readers will encounter. The top-down approach is also referred to as "whole-to-part" based on its emphasis on larger linguistic units.

*Transactional theory:* a theory of reading that focuses on the interaction between the reader, the text, and the context, emphasizing that each reader will have a unique experience of a text based on the creation of meaning as the two come together during the reading event.

*Turnaround school:* a school receiving school improvement grant money in order to make school improvements based on an official designation to turn around the academic performance of students.

*Universal Design for Learning:* an educational framework to optimize learning through development of educational environments that adapt to individual differences in learners.

*Vocabulary development:* learning of the meanings of words in order to develop schema and increase comprehension of reading materials.

*Whole language*: a philosophy of reading and writing that places emphasis on real language in reading development and writing that engages children in constructivist processes that produce writing that is meaningful to them

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This review of the literature explores the research relevant to principal leadership and literacy reform. I have organized the research into four distinct areas that serve to embed my research questions in the context of educational leadership, literacy pedagogy, and literacy instructional capacity. The literature review is structured to strengthen my assertion that research in educational reform needs to consider the role of principals, their perceptions and enactments, as an important factor in literacy achievement in high-need schools. I begin by positioning my research in current understandings of learning-focused leadership, narrowing this topic to leadership in literacy. I then discuss the antecedents of present-day literacy instruction and the current state of our knowledge as a means of highlighting the history of literacy pedagogy and the complex networks of understanding that underlie literacy development. The third body of literature I discuss is research related to building literacy instructional capacity through PD, coaching, and sources of renewal in schools.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership “encourages a focus on improving the classroom practices of teachers as the direction for the school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p.4). Student learning must be the ultimate goal of schools and is a necessary focal point for instructional change (Fullan, 2007; Marzano et al., 2005; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). In

the equation of instructional leadership, principals are a key player. In their six-year study linking educational leadership to student learning, Seashore et al. (2010) concluded, “To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (p. 9). Research on educational leadership has generated an extensive list of best practices directed at educational reform. Leithwood et al. (2004) have narrowed this list to a “common set of ‘basic’ leadership practices used by successful leaders in most circumstances” to influence student learning: setting direction, developing people, and making the organization work (p. 2). In this section, I describe these roles, drawing in supporting research from the literature on educational leadership.

### **Setting Direction**

Research on educational leadership converges on the importance of creating shared goals and then developing understandings about how to accomplish these goals. Improving the instructional quality of schools requires a comprehensive focus on student learning expectations (Seashore et al., 2010). The centrality of the principal’s role to inspire a shared vision and communicate high expectations for all students has been well documented (Chance & Segura, 2009; Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009; Grissom, 2011; Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2004; Ovando & Cavazos, 2004; Theoharis, 2010; Youngs & King, 2002). Effective educational leaders communicate the goal of high expectations for teaching and student performance, and they work to create buy-in for this goal (Portin et al., 2009). They spread the message that all students can learn from a challenging

curriculum (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Marzano et al., 2005) and reinforce ownership of the vision of improved student learning through persistent and public sharing of the message (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010). They are able to create processes through which a shared vision is sustained, so that individuals in the organization feel that their work fits into the overall mission and contributes meaningfully to it (Leithwood et al., 2004).

A bottom-line necessity for this vision is a concrete depiction of exactly what quality planning and teaching look like (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). Effective principals articulate a “coherent vision of instruction, one which teachers and other faculty could envision and emulate; the development of a set of non-negotiable expectations for effort and practice; and consistent implementation of the vision across classrooms” (Knapp et al., 2010; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001)

Supovitz and Poglinco (2001) describe the work of being a principal as a “tug of war among managerial, political, and instructional responsibilities.” Their observations suggest that principals are commonly overwhelmed by managerial duties. Given the time and energy these responsibilities take, principals commonly find it difficult to exercise instructional supervision with the quality they envisage. However, effective principals made a clear distinction between the managerial and instructional tasks; they make the instructional role a priority (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). In this way, effective principals model the direction of their schools and put learning at the forefront of this direction. A community of dialogic inquiry is an important ever-present reminder of the direction of the school, and principals encourage formal and informal dialogues for the overall goal of



student outcomes. Effective teaching is a central theme in these conversations (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001).

### **Developing People**

Instructional leaders recognize that concrete steps must be taken in order to develop the capacity of school personnel. Three specific practices that Leithwood et al. (2004) target to develop people are providing: intellectual stimulation; individual support; and models of ideal practices and beliefs. Learning-focused leaders commonly see themselves as “investing” resources through the allocation of staff (Knapp et al., 2010). They broaden the foundation for change by cultivating informal and formal school leaders (Supovitz and Poglinco, 2001). They also make purposeful decisions to facilitate trust among school personnel by welcoming communication and collaboration in order to engage everyone in the vision of improved student learning (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). Effective schools share:

A commitment to teacher professionalism that enables teachers to function as full professionals by providing ongoing, on-site professional development and support that is aligned with the standards and in which content and pedagogy are intimately connected. (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001, p. iv)

Therefore, effective principals seek out opportunities for educational staff to increase their professionalism through structures that support their own continual learning and growth with the ultimate goal of student learning and growth.

Instructional leaders also develop the people in their organization through professional collaborations. Seashore et al. (2010) highlight the role principals play in creating professional communities focused on student learning: “While many factors

affect whether or not professional community exists in a school, one highly significant factor is strong leadership by principals” (p. 43).

Teacher effectiveness is obviously a crucial component to literacy achievement. Knowledge about how to teach a particular subject forms the foundation on which strong teaching occurs (Leithwood et al., 2004). As is evident from the number of unsuccessful strategies that have been tried in the effort to teach reading (see History of Reading Instruction section), the language arts form a complex system of oral and written language that require extensive pedagogical knowledge to teach. Effective principals are aware of the complexities to teaching literacy and work to develop the people who are central to this enterprise- teachers. They cultivate a safe environment so that teachers can feel comfortable to take risks that produce change (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001).

Assuming that increased understandings of how to teach literacy produce higher student achievement, one aspect of the principal’s work as an instructional leader is to ensure that teachers have opportunities to deepen their pedagogical knowledge through PD and other experiences districts offer. Principals affect the types of PD that teachers are exposed to, because their beliefs about reading instruction impact the choice of policy messages they bring back to schools from the district (Coburn, 2005).

Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley, and Parkhill (2011) found particular leadership qualities were associated with upper elementary reading achievement in New Zealand schools. Principals with higher reading gains took the opportunity to engage in professional discussions, informal and formal, with literacy leaders and teachers. During these discussions, these principals engaged in collaborative problem solving about

literacy issues with school staff. They sought out high-quality PD targeted to the literacy needs of the school, and they involved themselves in refining schoolwide literacy plans with staff. Principals in these schools became active learners during PD and promoted a culture of collaborative learning. By all of these behaviors, instructional leaders acted to develop the people in their schools through interactive methods that produced collaborative discussions and dialogic inquiry with the goals of improved literacy achievement.

Instructional leaders facilitate supportive conditions that allow for teachers to work collaboratively to increase pedagogical knowledge in communities of practice and team-oriented cultures (Fullan, 2007; Marzano et al., 2005; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001; Portin et al, 2009). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) concludes that:

Teachers need regular, frequent, and structured opportunities to work together to develop curricula; design learning experiences; create assessments; devise ways to improve their individual practice; analyze student work and strategize about the best supports for specific students; help each other with questions related to content, pedagogy, or cultural competence; and share feedback. (2016, p.9)

In the current culture of increased accountability, there is even a greater need to develop trust among educational professionals in order to create strong communities of practice (Fullan, 2007). As well as facilitating opportunities for communities of practice to occur, principals play a major role in building this sense of trust as a part of the school culture.

### **Redesigning the Organization**

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) contend that school leadership should more legitimately be viewed as the collective activities of both formal and informal

leaders in a school, as opposed to the responsibility of one individual such as the principal. Effective principals do not work by themselves. Instead, they take advantage of organizational structures to create collaborative networks focused on improved student learning. A major study of the link between educational leadership and student achievement found:

Compared with lower achieving schools, higher-achieving schools provided all stakeholders with greater influence on decisions. The higher performance of these schools might be explained as a consequence of the greater access they have to collective knowledge and wisdom embedded within their communities. (Seashore et al., 2010, p.35)

Further, the researchers concluded that this sharing of leadership among various constituents in high-performing schools did not diminish the importance and centrality of the leadership role principals hold.

**Distributed leadership.** Effective instructional leaders make good use of the support that districts have to offer. One form of district support that is increasingly more common in schools is the investment in school roles that create distributed leadership models (Portin et al, 2009). Based on their study of urban school systems, Knapp et al. (2010) described:

Within schools, a striking number and variety of individuals exercised instructional leadership, in addition to the school principal or any assistant principals whose work was explicitly instructionally focused, under arrangements that allocated some portion of their assignment to leadership work. (p. 11)

This model is also characterized by an investment in teacher leaders who provide a majority of the PD and coaching to classroom teachers (NCTAF, 2016). Based on their extensive research, Seashore et al. (2010) conclude that “collective leadership is linked to

student achievement indirectly, through its effects on teacher motivation and teachers' workplace settings" (p. 36) and when "principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher" (p. 36).

However, Leithwood et al. (2004) warn that the concept of distributed leadership is "in danger of becoming no more than a slogan unless it is given more thorough and thoughtful consideration" (p. 5). Rather than looking at distributed leadership as an organizational structure, it might therefore be more accurate to look at it as a series of practices and interactions as Harris and Spillane (2008) suggest:

A distributed model of leadership focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in formal and informal leadership roles. It is primarily concerned with *leadership practice* and how leadership influences organisational and instructional improvement. (p. 31)

By viewing distributed leadership as a series of interactions and practices, the concept is less likely to be misrepresented as a way for principals to divest of certain responsibilities or for siloed work to occur among various isolated individuals in a school.

**Data Use.** Instructional leaders use evidence in various forms as a reference point in communicating the current state of instruction and learning (Knapp et al., 2010). Effective schools have created systems for using student data to track academic progress and adjust instructional practices accordingly (Knapp et al., 2010). Instructional leaders "ask useful questions of the data, display data in ways that told compelling stories, and use the data to both structure collaborative inquiry among teachers and provide feedback to students about their progress toward graduation goals" (Portin et al, 2009). They find ways to internalize the district and state accountability systems so as to develop a unique

internal accountability system that works to continuously monitor progress of students and inform instructional practice (Portin et al., 2009).

Principals, who emphasized the use of reading achievement assessments as a formative tool to monitor and identify the reading needs of students, were more likely to see reading gains than if they were used solely as a measure of accountability (Fletcher et al., 2011). In addition to using achievement data, principals who work in effective schools also encourage teachers to find their own less formal data sets to include in the mix of evidence that will be used to analyze student growth and plan next steps for instruction (Portin et al., 2009).

Beyond finding adequate data sets to measure and diagnose student performance, effective principals develop the people in their schools through interactive methods that produced collaborative discussions and dialogic inquiry (Fletcher et al., 2011). Regularly scheduled data team meetings create a structure through which educational professionals can be involved in communities of practice that anchor their discussions about data to improving student learning (Portin et al., 2009). Based on the idea that “groups that form around some specific purpose are a more effective means to achieve that purpose than would be individuals working on the same task in isolation” (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001), data team meetings enable educational professionals to collaboratively engage in analysis of student work in order to increase instructional effectiveness in the classroom. These meetings develop professional expertise through constructivist learning. Forums for data analysis also engender more consistent use of data to differentiate instruction based on student needs and current literacy performance (Portin et al., 2009), making it

clear that certain students in high-need schools have sufficient gaps to warrant additional literacy support.

### **The Principal as a Literacy Leader**

The ILA (2010) sets a standard for principal candidates that they have coursework in reading and reading-related areas. Yet subject-specific instruction, and the content knowledge needed to teach particular subjects, is oftentimes treated generically in research on principals under headings such as “academic leadership” (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013). Stein and Nelson (2003) assert that “leadership content knowledge is a missing paradigm in the analysis of school and district leadership” (p. 423). Spillane (2005) states, “Though on the radar screen, instruction is still something of a fringe interest in school leadership and school administration scholarship” (p. 383).

Overholt and Szabocsik (2013) discuss the frustration that elementary, middle, and high school teachers feel when principals, who do not have an understanding of literacy instruction, observe literacy lessons. They juxtapose the continued call for principals to be instructional leaders with the lack of literacy knowledge of many principals:

Instructional leadership is defined in generic terms. While observing in classrooms, principals look for questioning strategies, wait time, management skills, and engagement techniques. Little attention is given to the content or pedagogy that has been recognized by experts in the field as beneficial to students. Consequently, principals’ post-observation conferences with teachers are not subject-specific. Often, teachers feel disappointed that the principal was not more aware of what actually transpired during the literacy lesson. (Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013, pp. 53-54)

Faced with situations where principals have little understanding of best instructional practice to develop literacy, teachers may lose respect for principals who ask them to return to antiquated practices. Overholt and Szabocsik (2013) describe this common scenario, providing an example of one situation in which a teacher had to spend a few months defending her balanced literacy classroom and fighting against the pressure from the principal to return to whole group instruction and the basal reading series.

Principals' content knowledge has been found to influence many factors of the school experience for teachers, which has consequences for the learning of students. The content knowledge principals bring to their schools impacts the learning opportunities provided to teachers (Burch & Spillane, 2003), classroom observations made by principals (Nelson & Sassi, 2000; Nelson, Sassi, & Driscoll, 1999), and feedback given to teachers by principals (Nelson & Sassi, 2000).

Specific to reading, very little research has been conducted to identify literacy leadership knowledge (Sulentic Dowell, Bickmore, & Hoewing, 2012). "While characteristics of effective school leaders, specifically school principals, have been identified, leadership within schools that will promote high literacy achievement has not been as carefully examined" (Lewis-Specter & Jay, 2011).

In addition, research on the direct impact of principals on literacy achievement is also scant. This lack of focus on literacy instruction specific to principal leadership is problematic given the fact that targeted networks of knowledge need to be utilized to make meaningful inferences when observing teachers, inferences that can then be used in deep conversations with teachers about literacy instruction.



An example of the issues that can arise when principals are out of touch with the literacy instruction in their schools is illustrated in a study conducted by Reeves' (2008). The findings of this study concluded that there were major discrepancies between the actual amount of time spent on reading instruction and principals' perceptions of the amount of time. Reeves (2008) advances three challenges that school leaders need to meet in order to improve reading achievement: providing leadership that produces curricular consistency in reading instruction across the school; defining what good teaching of reading means; and balancing consistency with differentiation to meet the unique instructional needs of students.

In their study of 15 school administrators, Burch & Spillane (2003) found that principals viewed literacy as a content area that straddles all subjects and that principals, therefore, encouraged all teachers' participation in the development of and discussion about literacy curriculum, not just designated reading specialists. Principals considered literacy as an overall measure of student achievement and indication of school progress (Spillane, 2005). In addition, principals and assistant principals demonstrated a greater likelihood of being involved in language arts routines than in other subject areas. The principals in this study (Spillane, 2005) demonstrate an understanding of the universality of literacy in school curriculum and instruction.

An experimental study conducted by Silva, White, and Yoshida (2011) found that principals had a significant direct effect on students' reading achievement scores. Middle school students performing at the non-proficient level on a state reading test were randomly assigned to a control group or an experimental group. With each student in the

experimental group, the principal conducted a one-on-one discussion about their reading scores and goals for the subsequent year. Based on student self-report data, these discussions motivated experimental group students to perform better on the reading test in the subsequent year. Post-discussion year reading gains of the experimental group were substantially greater than those of the control group (Silva, White, & Yoshida, 2011).

A study of the direct effects of school principals on reading achievement in Reading First schools (Nettles & Herrington, 2007) found significant relationships between principal decisions and reading achievement of first-grade students. Using a three-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) growth curve model, the researchers found that increased principal support of effective reading intervention strategies positively impacted the reading achievement of first-grade students. Specifically, first-grade students increased an additional three words per minute over the school year (as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills Oral Reading) and exhibited an accelerated rate of fluent reading in schools where principals supported high levels of Reading First Program implementation.

### **Family-School Literacy Connections**

Seashore et al. (2010) stress the inclusion of a wide variety of stakeholders in literacy leadership. These include parents and community members, as well as school personnel. In leadership structures such as site-based management, parents take on leadership roles that are central to the success of schools in improving student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). There is strong evidence that parent-community-school

partnerships are a highly influential combination for improving student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). However, educational research documents “the well-known and persistent challenges teachers and administrators face in creating authentic relationships with parents for school-improvement purposes” (Seashore et al., 2010, p. 32).

An important aspect of principal leadership that is typically left out of the literature is the role that principals can play in making literacy connections between parents and the school to promote home reading engagement. Through case study research, Riley and Webster (2015) describe the ways a project, Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC), forged shared leadership between Indigenous community leaders and principals in Australia to increase reading outcomes in 48 schools. The researchers found that the deliberate focus of the principal on literacy achievement and the value the principal put on the literacies of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait, increased the engagement of community leaders and established school-parent partnerships focused on literacy.

### **History of Reading Instruction**

Principals make many administrative decisions about literacy instruction throughout any given year. In the absence of sound knowledge about what has been tried in the past and what has or has not worked, schools risk the outcome of lower achievement due to poor decision-making on the part of leadership. It is, therefore, critical for principals to know historical trends in literacy instruction in order to make sound educational decisions. Within this historical context, it is essential to understand

the interplay of reading instruction with other forms of literacy—how literacy is supported, enhanced, and reinforced by the spectrum of communicative processes.

In this section, I focus on the reading instruction, given the centrality of this skill in the success of students in school. Moore, Monaghan, and Hartman (1997) refer to history as a “marginalized research genre among literacy professionals” (p. 1) and assert “educators can improve their understandings of current situations when they have historical settings as a conceptual background” (p. 2). Educational professionals in schools need to know the history of reading instruction in order to recognize how the field has arrived at its current position so that informed decisions can be made.

### **Bottom-Up V. Top-Down Reading**

Theories of the cognitive processes involved in reading have been characterized by two basic approaches. Bottom-up approaches focus on the printed page and how readers extract information. Factors lower on the scale of meaning making (sounds, letter, and individual words) are described as building sequentially to larger units of meaning, which result in reading comprehension. The bottom-up approach is also referred to as “part-to-whole,” because of its initial focus on a linear process from smaller units to sentences and meaning. Top-down approaches posit that readers use their linguistic knowledge to form hypotheses and make predictions about the words they will encounter in reading and take in only as much visual information as is needed to either confirm or deny hypotheses. The top-down approach is also referred to as “whole-to-part” based on its emphasis on larger linguistic units. These approaches form an overarching method of categorizing reading theories.

**Bottom-Up Approaches.** Used from the 1600s through the early 1800s in America, the Alphabet Method was a bottom-up approach dependent on recitation and memorization. The process began with naming the letters of the alphabet. Children proceed to spell aloud syllables, such as “ab,” “eb,” “ib,” “ob,” “ub,” which were included in a list of syllables termed a syllabary. The letters and syllabary were printed with the Lord’s prayer on a hornbook, which looked like a small paddle and was named for the transparent sheet of horn that covered it. The beginning reader would recite each word of the printed prayer found on their hornbook (Monaghan, 2005). In addition, Colonial students read from small books mainly containing prayers, called “primers” because they were considered to contain the primary information for spiritual existence (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Beginning readers would orally spell and then say one-syllable words chosen based on their common usage (Barry, 2005). In the early 1800s, due to changes in attitudes toward childhood as well as educational theories that emphasized the ineffectiveness of rote memorization, the Alphabet Method faded in popularity.

In the 1970s, two bottom-up approaches gained widespread attention and currently remain popular. Gough (1972) posited a model of reading whereby the brain processes each letter based on the visual information of the text and connects each letter to speech sounds. The individual sounds are pieced together to create words, which are then connected in sequence to comprehend the message of the text.

LaBerge and Samuels (1974) focused on the importance of automatic word processing during which the mind combines sub-skills (letter discrimination, letter-sound training, blending, etc.) to achieve comprehension. They describe a fluent reader as one

who has “mastered each of the sub-skills at the automatic level” and “even more important, made their integration automatic as well” (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974, p. 318). LaBerge and Samuels (1974) posited that fluency includes the two criteria of accuracy and automaticity. This theory became an important consideration in later philosophies of reading development and was included as one of the five essential components of reading in what has been terms the “science of reading” (National Panel Report, 2000).

**Top-Down Approaches.** During the 1820s, educators in the United States became increasingly influenced by European educational philosophers, such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi, who emphasized the centrality of meaning in the educational experience (Mathews, 1966; Monaghan, 2005). In the *American Journal of Education*, Horace Mann and other American educators published criticisms of spelling books for their monotonous lists of words and mind-numbing essay requirements because of their meaninglessness to students. Based on this emphasis on meaning, educators began to introduce top-down approaches to reading words by sight with the idea that children learned from whole to part, not from part to whole (Mathews, 1966; Monaghan, 2005).

In the Word Method, teachers taught whole words so that readers would instantly recognize them. Pictures and concrete examples were provided to assist in the process, and printed words were linked to words children already knew through oral language development (Barry, 2008). This method was abandoned as ineffective and then resurrected one hundred years later in the “Dick and Jane” series, which took a predominantly whole word approach to reading about the events of a white, suburban, middle-class families and their pets, Spot and Puff.

Another top-down approach inspired by the broader educational emphasis on meaning was developed in the 1880s by Colonel Francis Parker, whom John Dewey referred to as “the father of progressive education,” (Encyclopedia of Chicago). It was called the Sentence Method of Reading (1895), and story-method readers were developed in order to support this instructional approach. Children were exposed to a story one sentence at time, as the teacher used illustrations and posed questions, such as “What is this?” after showing a picture of a cow on a farm. The teacher wrote the students’ whole sentence responses on the board, and the students then read the sentence (Cavanaugh, 1994; Farnham, 1895). After the story was constructed using this protocol, the teacher moved from whole-to-part by leading students in an examination of the whole sentence, then the words in the sentence, and finally the letters in the words.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Story Method also gained popularity as a top-down approach. The teacher would first read the whole text, which was often a rhyme or story with repetitive elements, and the students would memorize the text prior to seeing it in print. Based on his belief that the content of the material was more important in teaching young children to read than the particular method used, Charles Eliot Norton, a professor of art and social reformer who was highly influential in this movement, compiled the Heart of Oak Series of Reading Books which contained rhymes and fables. In the introduction to the series, Norton (1910) describes the aesthetic nature of the interaction he hoped for:

In the use of these books in the education of children, it is desirable that much of the poetry they contain be committed to memory. To learn by heart the best poems is one of the best parts of the school education of the child. But it must be

learning *by heart*; that is not merely by rote as a task but by heart as a pleasure. (p. iv)

The importance of the interaction of the child with the text would later be echoed in Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978). During the late 1800s into the 1900s, various forms of word, sentence, and story methods to reading instruction experienced rises and falls in popularity, peaking in the 1970s through the 1990s with the whole language movement.

### **Interactive Theory**

While interactive theory has been considered to be a meeting point between the two extremes of bottom-up and top-down approaches, the relationship is more complex in that this theory puts forth the idea of parallel processing. Interactive theory posits that readers construct meaning from text by attending to various cues (graphophonic, morphemic, syntactic, and semantic systems). Rumelhart (1976) maintained that cognitive processing cannot be described simply through linear models of bottom-up or top-down theories. He explicated a model in which multiple sources of information operate on the visual stimuli the eye takes in and sends to the brain. Orthographic, lexical, syntactic, and semantic sources work simultaneously to create meaning from the textual material. Stanovich (1984) portrayed an interactive reading model in which the cueing systems compensate for each other in order to read fluently. For example, if a reader's graphophonic cueing system is weak, the reader might automatically offset this deficit by using the syntactic and semantic cueing systems to greater effect in order to coherently read the text.



This approach focuses on literacy development as more than the sum of its parts. As such, it emphasizes that reading is not a set of separate components that work asynchronously, but rather an interrelational activity requiring complex interactions between oral and written language systems. More current philosophies of reading instruction that echo the interactive approach can be found in balance reading programs and integrated literacy approaches. These focus on listening, speaking, reading, and writing as a language system that work together to develop literacy.

### **Transactional Theory**

Transactional theory focuses on the interaction between the reader, the text, and the context, emphasizing that each reader will have a unique experience of a text based on the creation of meaning as the two come together during the reading event. Mirroring the paradigm set forth by Dewey and Bentley (1949), Rosenblatt (1988) uses the term transaction to “designate relationships in which each element conditions and is conditioned by the other in a mutually-constituted situation” (p. 2). Transactional theory divides the stance of the reader into either an aesthetic or efferent attitude of engagement with the text. In an aesthetic stance, the reader is engaged in the feelings and images aroused by the text. The reader is focused on gleaning information from text when taking an efferent stance. Rosenblatt posited that readers shape a text, during the act of reading, by reflecting on their own past experiences. These personal experiences shape their understanding of the text and contribute to the reader’s schema (Rosenblatt, 2005).

## **Phonics**

A bottom-up approach that began around the time of Civil War and has returned again and again in reading instruction is phonics. The initial momentum for phonics arose as an effort to be more scientific in approaching reading instruction so as to help readers to be more independent in learning the system and provide logic for readers who struggled with the inconsistencies of English orthography. Its initial introduction into the curriculum was through “phonic” readers (Barry, 2008).

Invented or reformed phonics was developed in the mid-1800s due to a conviction that students would learn to read best based on an alphabet in which each letter corresponded to only one sound (Harrison, 1964; Monaghan & Barry, 1999). The developers of the new alphabet observed that English orthography may be confusing due to the many sounds an individual letter can make. For instance, the “e” sound can be spelled in a number of different ways for even simple words (bed, head, said). An Englishman named Isaac Pittman published the first phonetic alphabet in 1844 in order to assist in spelling words (Harrison, 1964; Barry, 2008). The Deseret alphabet was devised a decade later. Developed by George Watt, a protégé of Pitman, at the request of Brigham Young for the Utah Public Schools, it was eventually discontinued (Barry, 2008).

Diacritical marks, symbols such as the line above the long sound of the letter “a” as in ā, were added to letters in order to distinguish the various pronunciations of particular letters. For instance, vowel sounds are characterized by at least two variations, the long and short sounds. These variations were made clear to beginning readers by placing a symbol above the vowel in order to distinguish the sounds the letter makes

(Monaghan & Barry, 1999). In the 1800s, Edward G. Ward, former superintendent of Brooklyn, New York public schools, created a set of readers that extensively used diacritical marks. These sets included stories such as “The Little Red Hen” and fables such as *The Wind and the Sun* (Barry, 2008).

Synthetic phonics approaches, which did not use diacritical marks, were in use by the 1800s. Based on these readers, students would: (1) learn letter names and corresponding sounds with the aid of pictures; 2) begin blending words after a few letter-sound correspondences were learned; 3) read aloud stories with the letter-sound correspondence learned. These are called decodable texts in modern times.

### **Whole Language**

Whole language (Goodman K. & Goodman Y., 1979; Goodman, K., 1986) is a top-down approach that was heavily influenced by constructivist theories. Beginning in the United States in the mid-to-late 1970s, whole language is deemed one of the most influential educational movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (De Carlo, 1995). Pearson (2002) described it as “the most significant movement in reading curricula in the last thirty years” (p. 448). In a seminal work on the movement, *What’s Whole in Whole Language* (1986), Goodman emphasized his belief that bottom-up approaches do not work:

Moving from small units to large units has an element of adult logic: wholes are composed of parts; learn the parts and you’ve learned the whole. But the psychology of learning teaches us that we learn from whole to parts. That’s why whole language teachers only deal with language parts – letters, sounds, phrases, sentences – in the context of whole real language. (p. 9)

Goodman rejected both word methods and phonics. He pointed out that children learn “oral language without having it broken into simple bits and pieces” (1986, p. 7)

and argued that children learn written language, reading and writing, in the same way as oral language. He directed teachers to “put aside the carefully sequenced basal readers, spelling programs, and handwriting kits” and “invite pupils to use language” (Goodman, 1986, p. 7). Whole language teachers engaged students in reading children’s books from real authors rather than the stories created by the creators of basals. The first support group, Teachers Applying Whole Language, formed in Missouri in 1978 as the grass-roots movement grew, gaining widespread usage in the 1980s and 1990s (Barry, 2008).

While Goodman states that the purpose of the book, *What’s Whole in Whole Language*, is to describe the essence of the whole language movement, he makes a disclaimer that “nothing in this book should discourage any teacher or group of teachers from developing their own version of whole language” (1986, p. 5). Hence, a continual issue the whole language movement faced was confusion over an actual definition that clearly laid out its specific characteristics. There was not even a consensus on whether the movement was a philosophy, method, model, theory, or even a movement. Through an analysis of the literature on whole language, Bergeron (1990) made an attempt to resolve this issue by creating a definition:

Whole language is a concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embedded within, and supportive of, that philosophy. This concept includes the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop a student’s motivation and interest in the process of learning. (p. 319)

As a reaction to the skills-based reading instruction of past eras, whole language focused on reading whole texts and reading engagement, de-emphasizing the importance of learning to decode as a main step to effectively reading (Goodman, 1986).

The use of Reader's Workshop with students focused on making meaning from text through literature circles. Writer's Workshop emphasized engagement of children in writing based on their own experiences, which were usually personal accounts and stories, and eschewed grammar and spelling instruction conducted out of context (Graves, 1983). Mini-lessons were the main form of whole class, teacher-directed instruction; these were to be kept short (10-15 minutes) in order to devote a majority of the time to student work-time during which they were engaged in the processes of reading and writing (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983).

In 1988, whole language entered the arena of politics through the California English-Language Arts Framework, which called for a shift from skills-based reading programs to quality children's literature. By 1992 and 1994, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had twice tested the students of California near the bottom of the 50 states on reading achievement (Freeman, Freeman, & Fennacy, 1997), and California recommitted to phonics (Reading Task Force, 1995).

Major outcomes from the whole language movement were an increase in reading and writing of cohesive texts. Authentic children's literature was incorporated into the curriculum at the elementary and middle school level. Through Reader's Workshop approaches, children were involved in reading whole books and engaging in meaningful conversations about literature. Through Writer's Workshop, children were encouraged to

think of themselves as writers and were involved in constructivist processes of creating their own pieces of writing from a variety of genres. These works were presented in various formats as “published works,” which were incorporated in the classroom reading material or school library.

### **Balanced Literacy**

Balanced literacy programs became popular in the latter half of the 1990s (Pressley, 1998). In addition to the fact that whole language was not producing an acceptable level of reading performance in U. S. public schools based on the results of NAEP tests, critics of whole language also argued that it did not have sound research behind it. Like whole language, the definition of balanced literacy remained vague. However, there was consensus that this approach continued to include the high-quality literature important to the whole language movement, but also included skills such as phonics (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998). Thus, top-down and bottom-up approaches came together in balanced literacy. Despite its murky definition, a number of different balanced literacy programs have been shown to have a positive impact on reading achievement in the elementary grades (Duffy, 1991; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

### **Science of Reading**

The 1990s saw an increase of federal government involvement in public education, in general, and in literacy instruction, in particular. The National Reading Panel (NRP) issued a report in 2000 identifying important methods and skills effective in reading achievement. The report was based on a review of over 100,000 empirical studies

that met particular criteria for high quality (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Studies that were not experimental or quasi-experimental were excluded. The NRP (2000) summarized their findings in five areas of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. In 2001, No Child Left Behind and Reading First legislation (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2003) placed political emphasis on these five areas of reading instruction listed in the NRP report (2000). These five areas would come to be called the “science of reading.”

**Phonemic Awareness.** The NRP report (2000) describes phonemic awareness as “the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words” (p. 20). Because print is alphabetic but oral language is based on sound, readers need to initially be able to separate out sounds in order to map them onto letters as a foundational skill to decoding. Based on the results of a meta-analysis of relevant research studies on phonemic awareness, the NRP concluded that “teaching phonemic awareness to children is clearly effective. It improves their ability to manipulate phonemes in speech. This skill transfers and helps them learn to read and spell” (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 58).

**Phonics.** After a precipitous decline in popularity during the whole language movement, phonics was given prominence once again as an essential component of reading instruction. Despite decades of debate, research consistently affirms that most children need direct instruction in phonics (Chall, 1967; American Federation of Teachers, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000). As they learn how to read, children make connections between printed words and the sounds they represent by analyzing how print

represents specific sounds, which helps young readers to store the word in memory (Ehri, 1998).

Ehri (1998) identified four phases in children's developing knowledge of letter-sound correspondences: pre-alphabetic phase, partial alphabetic phase, full alphabetic phase, and consolidated alphabetic stage. In the pre-alphabetic stage, children attend to the visual aspects of a word but not to the alphabetic features. In the partial alphabetic phase, children begin to learn letter-sound correspondences and use their partial knowledge to form connections in order to read words. Commonly, readers in this phase will rely heavily on the beginning sound of a word and, because they are using partial cues, may confuse words such as *where*, *when*, and *were*. During the full alphabetic phase, readers are "glued to the print," as Chall (1996) describes. In contrast, in the consolidated alphabetic phase, readers consolidate their knowledge of larger units of the letter-sound patterns they see in words, enabling them to unglue from the print based on their wider knowledge of orthography (Chall, 1996).

The NRP report (2000) stressed important distinctions between the types of phonics programs that are most effective. Emphasis was placed on programs during which "children receive explicit, systematic instruction in a set of pre-specified associations between letters and sounds, and they are taught how to use them to read, typically in texts containing controlled vocabulary" (p. 119).

**Fluency.** Defined by the NRP report (2000) as readers who "can read text with speed, accuracy, and proper expression" (p. 189), another way to define fluency is "freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension in silent



reading or the expression of ideas in oral reading” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 85).

Fluency includes three components: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. The NRP report called for more attention to this “often neglected” but “critical component of skilled reading” (2000, p. 189). The review of the literature on fluency instruction concluded that “repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance leads to meaningful improvements in reading expertise ... for good readers as well as those experiencing difficulties” (p. 191).

Rasinski and Hamman (2010) assert “reading fluency is the essential link from word recognition to comprehension” (p. 26). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) clearly established a correlation between reading fluency and comprehension in a large-scale study (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). It is essential that readers gain accurate, automatic word recognition in order to become skilled readers (McConkie & Zola, 1987; Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). When readers can decode a majority of words they encounter automatically, this frees up cognitive resources for comprehension (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). Prosody, the ability to read with proper phrasing and intonation, is also linked to comprehension (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010).

**Vocabulary Development.** Based on an analysis of 50 studies that met the quality criteria for reading research, the NRP report acknowledged “vocabulary occupies an important position in learning to read” (NRP, 2000, p. 239) and impacts comprehension. A major positive trend reflected in the studies was that “high frequency and multiple, repeated exposures to vocabulary material are important for learning gains”

(NRP, 2000, p. 246). Another conclusion reported was the importance of both direct and indirect methods of teaching vocabulary (NRP, 2000).

Vocabulary development plays a major role in comprehension of texts. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) draw from the research of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) on “three tiers” of vocabulary. Tier 1 words are basic vocabulary used in everyday speech. The CCSS emphasize Tier 2 vocabulary, words with subtle meanings that appearing much more commonly in text than in speech, and Tier 3 vocabulary, words that are often times specific to a particular content area. While all three levels are necessary in to reading comprehension, Tier 2 and Tier 3 words are essential to comprehension of complex texts and subject specific informational passages.

**Comprehension.** A main focus on comprehension in the NRP report (2000) was the effectiveness of cognitive strategy instruction as a means of explicitly supporting students in comprehending texts (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996).

Comprehension is, of course, the most main purpose for reading. The National Reading Panel (2000) described comprehension as “*intentional thinking* during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader” (pp. 4-5). Rosenblatt (1978) described comprehensions as a constructive and transactional process that involves the reader, the text, and the context in which the text is read.

The analysis of research studies concluded that, when students are provided with cognitive strategy instruction, they “make significant gains on measures of reading comprehension over students trained with conventional instruction procedures” (NRP, 2000, p. 262) and that “reading comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to comprehension as they read” (NRP, 2000, p. 337).

**Criticisms.** A major criticism of the NRP report (2000) is that the studies relied heavily on research of children with reading disabilities. This likely produced an emphasis on particular components of reading that may need less attention for children on a more common trajectory of reading development. For instance, Krashen (2001) observes that the report devoted six pages to recreational reading in contrast to the sixty-six pages devoted to phonemic awareness and almost as many pages to phonics.

Another major criticism to the report is its definition of quality research. Its reliance on empirical and semi-empirical studies excluded studies that may have added to the research evidence on effective reading instruction but did not meet the rigid requirements of scientific evidence. For instance, the study excluded correlational and ethnographic studies of students learning to read in classrooms. On the issue of fluency, Krashen (2001) asserts:

It is only by omitting a large number of relevant studies, and misinterpreting the ones that were included, that the NRP was able to reach the startling conclusion that there is no clear evidence that encouraging children to read more improves reading achievement. (p.1)

Krashen (2001) also noted that the NRP did not include research studies on fluency that lasted longer than a year. Since research indicates that the positive impact of recreational reading increases over time, the NRP's exclusion of longer-term studies served to misrepresent the findings on recreational reading.

### **Implications for Principals**

A vast body of reading research has converged on more effective practices, but new insights into the reading process continue to unfold. It is crucial that principals understand the differences between less and more effective methods of teaching reading. Especially in high-need schools, high impact reading instruction is a necessity. In addition, principals need to have a solid understanding of the outcomes their district seeks in reading achievement and how these outcomes can be accomplished through reading practices that accelerate growth in reading achievement.

### **Building Literacy Instructional Capacity**

Senge et al. (2012) advise, "If you want to improve a school system, before you change the rules, you must first look to the ways people think and interact together" (p. 25). Coaching in schools is an important practice that focuses on the interactions of educational professionals. As such, it holds great promise for systematically increasing the effectiveness of literacy instruction in schools through deep learning. In order to deeply understand an idea or practice, learning theory stresses that individuals need modeling, opportunities to apply new concepts and receive feedback from experts, and

time to engage in conversations to deepen understanding (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Vaughan, 1996).

Instructional leadership behaviors are a key factor in positive outcomes related to PD, and research confirms the importance of principal participation in PD (Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Graczewski et al., 2009; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011; Youngs & King, 2002). Professional development has been a main means of providing learning opportunities for teachers to grow in their ability to deliver high level instructional practices. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation report that:

All told, \$18 billion is spent annually on PD, and a typical teacher spends 68 hours each year—more than a week—on professional learning activities typically directed by districts. When self-guided professional learning and courses are included, the annual total comes to 89 hours. (2014, p.3)

And yet, researchers and educators have consistently questioned the effectiveness of traditional PD and in-service training, such as one-stop workshops or presentations by visiting experts, as a stand-alone approach to instructional change (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 1995; Fullan, 2006; Huberman, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Before the 1980s, PD opportunities were characterized by didactic instruction separated from teachers' classroom contexts. As standards for student learning became more challenging, districts found that PD designed to meet the new reform criteria was making little headway in transference to student achievement (Cohen, 1990; Cohen & Ball, 1990; Cuban, 1993).

Even with high quality PD, estimates of the transfer of PD to classroom practice are as low as five percent (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Teachers echo the conclusions of research studies on PD. Only 29% of

teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with PD, and 34% of teachers believed PD has improved over the years (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Many principals share teacher's concerns about PD (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

Despite the overall poor perceptions of PD as it has traditionally been implemented, teachers agree that there are ways that PD can promote effective professional learning experiences. Based on a survey of over 1,600 teachers and focus groups that included 1,300 teachers, the characteristics that teachers defined for the “ideal professional development experience” were: relevant; interactive; delivered by a professional who understands their experience; treats teachers as professionals; and maintained over a period of time (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Research conducted by the Consortium of Chicago School Reform suggests that PD in schools that showed greater than expected improvements was targeted to the individual needs of teachers (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Because of the cumulative body of evidence on the effectiveness of coaching, recommendations of the National Staff Development Council (2001) call for PD that is interactive, collaborative, long-term, and connected to student outcomes and curricular choices.

Coaching has increasingly been used as a means of enhancing traditional forms of PD in U.S. public schools. No Child Left Behind legislation highlighted coaching as a form of teacher mentoring that provides “regular and ongoing support for teachers” designed to “help teachers continue to improve their practice of teaching and to develop their instructional skills” (NCLB, 2003). The inclusion of coaching as part of PD increases the successful implementation of new teaching methods (Joyce & Showers,

1995). More recently, coaching has been highlighted as a form of PD that has major potential for developing greater metacognition among teachers (Kinnucan-Welsch, 2005).

Day's review of 27 final reports from teacher action research projects concluded that coaching "can be a powerful tool to support teacher professional learning" (2015, p. 100). Based on a review of research on coaching, Cornett and Knight (2009) determined that coaching resulted in positive changes in student achievement, as well as in teacher attitudes, self-efficacy, and transfer of skills. Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis, and Bergen (2008) found, in their study of eight experienced teachers as they participated in a 1-year reciprocal peer coaching model, that coaching increased teachers' craft knowledge. A 3-year longitudinal study of a coaching between cooperating teachers and intern teachers reported positive effects for pre-service science teacher education (Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox, & Wassell, 2008).

In addition to the benefits of coaching on the instructional effectiveness of teachers, practices such as peer coaching can free up the principal's time by distributing leadership to other education professionals who have a record of high performance within a school. In order to make such peer coaching structures succeed, principals need to: allocate appropriate resources such as the provision of substitute teachers; provide support for ongoing training; and provide support and encouragement to maintain momentum (Zepeda, 2017).

### **Coaching and Literacy Achievement**

Specifically in regard to literacy instruction, federal policies such as Reading First and Striving Readers have endorsed the use of coaching. Reading First has supported

coaching in order to increase and improve implementation of scientifically based reading strategies (Joyce & Showers, 2002). The National Center for Reading First Technical Assistance ([NCRFTA], 2005) highlights the potential impact of this form of PD:

Coaching provides opportunities for teachers to learn and refine instructional practices, develop their abilities to reflect on and learn from their own teaching and the teaching of others, and incorporate new practices into their teaching routines. Coaching fosters a community of learners working together toward a common goal: improved student outcomes in reading. (p. 6)

Studies focused on emergent literacy indicate that coaching may be beneficial in supporting curricular implementation and training (Assel, Landry, Swank, & Gunnewig, 2007; Lonigan, Farver, Phillips, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2011) and other forms of PD (Jackson et al., 2006; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). A study comparing the impact of coursework alone and coursework with coaching on the language and literacy practices of early childhood educators provided strong evidence that coaching made an impact on the quality of practice (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). As a stand-alone form of PD, pre-kindergarten teachers in a coaching group obtained significantly higher scores on the *Language & Literacy Observation Toolkit* (Smith & Dickinson, 2002) compared to teachers who had been assigned to an in-service course or a control group (Neuman & Wright, 2010). In two studies of coaching alone that targeted emergent literacy skills, participants were found to use more emergent literacy strategies after coaching (Hsieh, Hemmeter, McCollum, & Ostrosky, 2009; McCollum, Hemmeter, & Hsieh, 2011). Remote coaching with pre-kindergarten teachers denoted improved use of emergent literacy instructional skills (Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, & Koehler, 2010).



Brady et al. (2009) studied an intensive year-long PD aimed at building the domain knowledge of first-grade teachers in phonological awareness and phonics. In addition to a 2-day summer institute and monthly workshops, four highly knowledgeable coaches met regularly with 12 teachers throughout the year. The authors cited the guidance of the coaches, through individualized meetings with the teachers, as a major factor contributing to positive gains in teacher knowledge of reading skills as measured by the Teacher Knowledge Survey (TKS).

Biancarosa, Bryk, and Dexter (2010) conducted a longitudinal study on the effects of schoolwide one-on-one coaching on K-2 students' literacy achievement. Student literacy learning was compared over three years, using a hierarchical, crossed-level, value-added-effects model. Results (standard effect sizes of .22, .37, and .43 in years 1, 2, and 3) indicated the implementation of literacy coaching provided substantial positive gains in reading achievement based on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and the Terra Nova standardized achievement test.

Sailors & Price (2010) used a random-effects, multilevel, pretest-posttest comparison group design and a multilevel modeling analytic strategy to ascertain the impact of two different forms of PD on the reading achievement of grades 2-8 students. Forty-four teachers participated in either a traditional 2-day summer in-service or a full intervention involving a workshop and ongoing support through coaching. Teacher observation measures and student achievement scores were greater for those teachers who received coaching.

Matsumura, Garnier, and Spybrook (2012) compared the effects of content-focused coaching (CFC) on fourth- and fifth-grade teachers' enactment of Questioning the Author (QtA). Using a cluster-randomized trial, schools were assigned to the comprehensive coaching program or a control group. At the end of year 2, a positive and significant effect (effect size [ES] = 0.89) was reported on the quality of text discussions for CFC teachers with CFC teachers being rated 0.89 standard deviations higher, on average, than the teachers in the control group (Matsumura et al., 2012).

A three-year mixed methods study by the Rand Corporation (Marsh, Sloan McCombs, & Martorell, 2010) examined the effects of a Florida-based reading coach program in middle schools on data-driven decisionmaking (DDDM) and achievement. Although relatively small, the researchers found a statistically significant association between reading achievement and support from coaches in reviewing student assessment data with teachers. 75% of reading teachers who received data support once a month or more during coaching reported that coaching had a moderate to large influence in changes to their instructional practices.

Cantrell and Hughes (2008) focused on year-long PD to support sixth- and ninth-grade content area teachers' implementation of literacy techniques as a means of improving learning of subject matter material. Data collected from interviews indicated that coaching played an integral role in increased self-efficacy and content literacy strategy implementation. Overall, survey results showed positive gains on teacher individual self-efficacy and collective self-efficacy related to content literacy implementation.

A PD initiative that used coaching as one means to increase reading achievement among high school students with severe reading disabilities yielded positive teacher ratings in regard to the practicality of the PD and increased teacher self-efficacy in understanding reading issues and how to improve student performance in reading (Lovett et al., 2008). In a comparison of student outcomes for teachers' first and subsequent classes, students performed better on text comprehension and in reading multi-syllabic words. A central aspect of this PD was the inclusion of highly trained coaches who conducted on-site visits and provided extensive feedback with opportunities for constructivist dialogue between coaches and teachers.

### **Coaching Models**

A broad understanding of the literacy learning and effective literacy instruction is an important characteristic of principals who are literacy leaders, but without an understanding of how to effectively coach, this knowledge may be insufficient to effect systemic schoolwide improvement in literacy achievement. In addition, principals' knowledge of effective coaching can play a critical role in their leadership ability with literacy coaches in schools.

In this section, I will review three coaching models focused on school improvement: cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002), content-focused coaching (West & Staub, 2003), and evocative coaching (Tschannen-Moran, B & Tschannen-Moran, M, 2010). After presenting a description of each model, I focus on the commonalities of these approaches in order to bring into relief the essential components of successful coaching.

**Cognitive Coaching.** Costa and Garmston (2002) describe cognitive coaching as a unique interactive strategy that focuses on internal processes rather than events or behaviors. The mission of cognitive coaching is to “produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for high performance, both independently and as members of a community” (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 16). Cognitive coaches work as mediators who view all interactions as opportunities to produce self-directed learning (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 21). Teachers and coaches perceive cognitive coaching to be “a powerful process in fostering collegiality, deepening reflective skills, and developing cognitive autonomy” (Garmston & Linder, 1993, p. 60).

**Content-focused Coaching.** Originally developed for mathematics (Staub, West, & Bickel, 2003), content-focused coaching has also been adapted to elementary literacy. The format for this type of coaching is: a pre-lesson conference; observation, teaching, or co-teaching of a lesson; and a post-conference (West & Staub, 2003). During the pre-conference, the teacher explains the lesson goals, the instructional plan, and the thinking process behind the lesson. The lesson plan may either be shared by the teacher or co-constructed by the teacher and coach during this time. The lesson can be either taught by the teacher, co-taught, or modeled by the coach. The post-lesson conference, issues that arose in the lesson are addressed. A major emphasis in content-focused coaching, as its name describes, is the continual focus on the content of learning, *what*, of the lesson and a commitment to integrate the *what* with ways of teaching, *how*.

**Evocative Coaching.** Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen Moran (2010) define evocative coaching as “calling forth motivation and movement in people, through

conversation and a way of being, so they achieve desired outcomes and enhance their quality of life” (p. 7). In contrast to “provocative coaching,” which creates oppositional power structures, the authors emphasize evocative coaching as a process that brings out the potential of people. Four elements characterize what Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran call the dance steps of evocative coaching: story, empathy, inquiry, and design.

**Commonalities.** A central focus of all three models is the creation of a process through which learning is optimized. Based on the “belief that growth is achieved through the development of intellectual functioning” (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 5), cognitive coaching increases teachers “capacity for sound decision making and self-directedness” (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 4). Content-focused coaching draws on cognitive psychology in understanding learning as an active process and knowledge-based constructivism as a foundation for deep learning (Resnick and Hall, 1998). Evocative coaching places a primary concern on generating consciousness in order to increase teachers’ capacity to learn from self-reflection.

Each model seeks to form a connection between the coach and those being coached. West and Staub (2003) devote an entire section of their book on advice to coaches on developing a professional partnership. As part of this process, they advise coaches to have an initial meeting with teachers in order to “get to know one another’s strengths and styles, professional dreams and goals, and philosophies and beliefs” (p. 23). Evocative coaching (Tschannen-Moran, B. & Tschannen-Moran, M. 2010) draws on social cognitive theory, humanistic psychology, and attachment theory to provide

guidance to coaches in creating growth-fostering relationships. A main goal of cognitive coaching (Coast & Garmston, 2002) is the creation of “positive interpersonal relationships that are the energy sources for adaptive school cultures and productive organizations” (p. 25).

Dialogue is an essential component of the three coaching models. Costa and Garmston (2002) describe cognitive coaching as a “simple model for conversations about planning, reflecting, or problem solving” (p. 4). This model delineates three types of conversations that may take place between the coach and teacher: the planning conversation, the reflecting conversation, and the reflecting conversation. Built on the traditions of appreciative inquiry and motivational interviewing, a main premise of evocative coaching is that “adults learning needs to be facilitated rather than directed” (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010, p. 9).

**Differences.** A major difference between the three coaching models is their stance on the expertise of the coach. Content-focused coaching relies on “excellent teachers in the same discipline as the teacher being coached, able to provide situation-specific assistance adapted to the teacher” (West & Staub, 2003, p. 1). The heavy emphasis on expertise in content-focused coaching may be due largely to its origins for improving mathematics instruction, which requires extensive knowledge of math content. In contrast, Costa and Garmston (2002) suggest that coaches do not need greater expertise than those whom they coach. Evocative coaching focuses on recognizing the competence teachers already have rather than giving priority to the expert of the coach. Importantly, in interviews with educational practitioners on their opinions about the expertise of the

coach, Neubert and Bratton (1987) reported that teachers and coaches in their study were adamant about the importance of the coach as a more knowledgeable expert.

### **Teacher Evaluation and the Principalship**

Given the current focus on teacher evaluation in the United States, it is important to comment on the intersections between coaching, teacher evaluation, and the principalship. Observations that occur during state mandated evaluations of teachers may be the only time when a principal is actually in the classroom specifically to observe instruction. Hence, educators who want to see real achievement gains need to consider how coaching can occur alongside teacher evaluation systems and how teacher evaluation can be implemented so as to create coaching opportunities between principals and teachers.

Student learning in schools cannot be improved without improved instruction. Fair and reasonable measures for teacher effectiveness are an important change to the profession, but these measures must influence student learning as an ultimate outcome. By attending to what actually happens in classrooms, teacher evaluation holds promise for systematically engendering improvements in academic achievement through the deep learning of educational professionals.

Before the 1980s, PD and clinical models of teacher supervision and evaluation were grounded in behaviorist psychology (Nelson & Sassi, 2000). Checklists of discrete observable behaviors were commonly used to identify teacher practices believed to be correlated with student achievement based on the research current at that time. In an effort to generate new ways of thinking about teaching and provide support for more

effective ways of teaching, alternative models of PD, supervision, and evaluation were needed (Garman, Glickman, Hunter, & Haggerson, 1987; Gusky, 1986; Kennedy, 1987; Lieberman, 1987; Schon, 1987; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990).

Currently, a whole new generation of teacher evaluation is being developed and implemented throughout the United States. It remains to be seen whether these models create a system of sustainable leadership for school improvement. How such measures are implemented and the processes through which accountability and improvement are managed become important considerations.

Teacher evaluation focuses on two aspects of educator effectiveness: instructional improvement and accountability. Looney (2011) states that “there are real tensions between these dual goals for evaluation, and education systems need to find an appropriate balance” (p. 440). Santiago and Benavides (2009) describe the challenges of combining these two functions:

When the evaluation is oriented towards the improvement of practice within schools, teachers are typically open to reveal their weaknesses, in the expectation that conveying that information will lead to more effective decisions on developmental needs and training. However, when teachers are confronted with potential consequences of evaluation on their career and salary, the inclination to reveal weak aspects of performance is reduced, i.e. the improvement function is jeopardized. (p. 8)

Since the accountability aspect of teacher evaluation is strongly supported by state education departments, as well as the national government, it is unlikely that teacher evaluation purely as a function for instructional improvement will receive support without its twin, accountability. It seems that educational professionals will have to live with this tension and find ways to balance the two functions.



Prior to the recent establishment of more systematic teacher evaluation systems, classroom observations of teachers were not generally considered to be a central time-consuming role for principals in public schools. Now, principals are increasingly required to spend more time within classrooms in order to fulfill the requirements of new teacher evaluation systems. Yet, many principals already feel immense time pressures in their attempt to accomplish the tasks required of the occupation. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) list “balancing school management with instructional leadership” as one of the main reasons for the difficulty of attracting quality leaders to the principalship. In order to provide principals with time to spend in meaningful teacher evaluations and coaching, it may be necessary to conduct time audits in schools in order to purge requirements and activities that sap the energy and time of principals and do nothing to increase student learning.

The new teacher evaluation systems are a part of the continuous effort to improve education. In order to create depth in sustainable leadership, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) assert that we must promote “deep and broad learning for all in relationships of care for others” (p. 23). By attending to what actually happens in classrooms, teacher evaluation holds great promise for systematically engendering improvements in academic achievement through the deep learning of teachers and principals. However, this deep learning is not likely to occur if teacher evaluation, alone, is implemented without a strong coaching component.

### **Sources of Renewal in Teacher Evaluation**

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) discuss three resources of renewal- trust, confidence, and emotion- as necessary to implementing meaningful and sustainable school reform efforts. If teacher evaluation systems are to be brought to a higher level of school improvement, these sources of renewal must be in place. When these sources of renewal are present, teacher evaluation can create collaborative moments of mutual learning between principals and teachers and serve to provide meaningful feedback to teachers and

**Trust.** Building trust in teacher evaluation is critical in order to help teachers feel comfortable in opening up their classrooms. Tschannen-Moran (2004) defines trust as the “willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (p. 17), and evocative coaching places trust as central to building the kind of relationships necessary for effective coaching. Costa and Garmston (2002) state that “cognitive coaching relies on trust” (p. 97).

Teachers must be able to trust that observations will be used toward what matters most- improved learning. In their study of five principals where substantial reading gains had been achieved, Fletcher et al. (2011) concluded these high-performing principals conveyed a vision and established trust with staff to encourage a collective school vision of literacy achievement. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) write “when adults in a school work well together, with reciprocal and relational trust, it increases energy for improvement that then benefits students and their achievement” (p. 214). This process may not be comfortable for a majority of teachers, long used to living within the silos of their own classrooms, but if teachers see that observations are conducted based on the mutual goal

of authentic professional learning and that the observation process results in increased student achievement, they will be more willing to invest in it. Coaching creates such opportunities for an engaged dialogic process that results in improved teaching and learning.

**Confidence.** In considering the importance of confidence as a source of renewal, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) speak of the “necessity of creating more optimistic conditions, in which teachers can regain confidence in themselves, setting them off on the winning streaks of improvement that their students so desperately deserve” (p. 218). Fletcher et al. (2011) found that reading achievement gains were made in schools where principals provided opportunities for content-based PD over extended periods of time, thus enabling teachers to increase their own confidence in their practice as reading teachers through attainment of practical skills. Teacher evaluation, while it necessitates providing reality checks to poor performing teachers who are unwilling to look critically at their own practice, should ultimately provide the confidence to teachers to make necessary improvements. This confidence is not likely to be engendered in teacher evaluation systems that do not provide the types of intentional thinking about classroom practices resultant from effective coaching models coupled with PD.

**Emotion.** Hargreaves and Fink discuss emotion as a resource of renewal, describing the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement where schools create shared targets and improvement projects with the results that 90% of their schools exceeded baseline expectations on a majority of measures each year (2006). Likewise, teacher evaluation in the United States could become a feedback loop whereby teachers and

principals work together in district and state networks to create shared targets and make decisions on needed staff development and other improvement projects. Here again, coaching provides such a process for feedback and collaboration among educational professionals.

### **Coaching and Teacher Evaluation**

Coaching is a natural fit in teacher evaluation systems that incorporate these three sources of renewal. Globally, teachers throughout many countries describe their evaluation experiences as conducted unsystematically by untrained evaluators who may use ineffective methods. In addition, teachers report that their PD needs are not directly linked to the outcomes of their evaluations (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005). Coaching provides a systematic means for principals and other educational leaders to observe and listen to the needs of teachers and to bring this information to the table in making decisions about schoolwide PD that truly makes an impact on instruction practices.

While some coaching models discourage the use of evaluators as coaches, the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), conducted by OECD in 23 participating countries, reported that teachers valued feedback from school leaders and prioritized instructional goals set in teacher evaluations (OECD, 2009). A coaching relationship between principals and teachers is likely to increase trust, confidence, and the type of emotion that works as a catalyst for second-order change (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004) both within classrooms and throughout schools. In addition,

incorporating coaching into the teacher evaluation process will serve to underscore the learning process that can ideally be embedded in teacher evaluation.

### **Coaching Principals**

In order to become literacy leaders, many current principals will need extensive coaching, themselves. While there are discrepancies between coaching models in regard to the assertions about the necessary level of expert knowledge needed by a coach, most content-specific coaching models recognize that coaches should be a more knowledgeable other.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) recommends that principal supervisors move away from focusing largely on ensuring that principals comply with district policies and governmental regulations. Rather, the focus of the principal supervisor needs to shift from compliance officer to coach so that they “can assess and evaluate principals’ current leadership practices and identify professional learning opportunities most likely to lead to improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and achievement” (CCSSO, 2015, p. 2).

Literacy achievement, as a central medium through which learning takes place in most academic subjects, would be a logical focus for the professional learning opportunities of principals. A promising direction for raising the level of principal knowledge and expertise in this area comes from research conducted by Overholt and Szabocsik (2013). After providing PD for principals based on core understandings of learning to read, principals who were provided with the PD were better able to recognize best practices in literacy and support those practices (Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013).

An important factor to consider in the model of principals as evaluators and coaches is the constructivist process that occurs during principals-teacher interactions.

Burch and Spillane (2003) found:

Leadership itself helped some leaders acquire information about teachers' subject-specific needs...Daily involvement in the teaching and learning process helped the leaders see the complexities involved in instructional reform and use these insights to modify schoolwide reform practices. By daily involvement, we mean leaders observing teachers in classrooms, analyzing student work, and meeting with small groups. (pp. 528-529)

Overholt and Szabocsik (2013) assert that “expert principals find ways to support teachers as they continue to learn in the context of their practice” (p. 57). Hence, these daily involvements can serve to provide principals with a forum through which mutual learning can take place between principals and teachers.

### **Conclusion**

A combination of factors must be in place to increase literacy achievement in schools. Educators need to move past silver-bullet solutions such as a magic curriculum, reliance on a few spectacular teachers, punishing models of teacher evaluation, and hit-or-miss PD. A rich body of knowledge exists that details more and less effective literacy practices throughout the centuries. This knowledge should be disseminated so as to enable principals to make sound decisions about schoolwide literacy instruction. Through interactions that promote sustained dialogue, principals can begin to engage with teachers about their literacy instruction. These opportunities can serve to increase the learning of both principals and teachers so that a mutual exchange can take place with the goal of creating better literacy learning environments for children. In this way, principals can co-

construct school and classroom environments that produce increased literacy achievement and promote a love of reading, writing, and other communicative processes.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Research Approach**

The purpose of this dissertation study is to contribute to the knowledge on the role of principals in literacy education. Specifically, I explore the complex interplay of the principal leadership with the work of teachers and literacy achievement of students, seeking to answer: 1) how do principals of high-needs elementary schools perceive their role as a literacy leader? and 2) how do principals of high-needs elementary schools describe their actions to improve literacy learning?

A multiple case study approach was selected as the most effective method for my research focus. While there are a number of definitions of case study research in various fields, Stake (1995) describes the case in educational research as often focusing on people and programs:

Each one is similar to other persons and programs in many ways and unique in many ways. We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them. We would like to hear their stories...we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn. (p. 1).

Given my interest in gaining a representative understanding of principals' perceptions as literacy leaders, a multiple case study was chosen rather than a single case study.



Stake (1995) delineates three categories for case study research: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. An intrinsic case study is designed to research a unique situation, resulting in limited transferability. The purpose of the instrumental case study is to gain insight into a particular phenomenon. A collective case study is used to compare data across a number of cases.

This study considered a collective study, although aspects of this research are instrumental to the extent that principals in high-need schools have similar experiences of literacy leadership as they work to enact substantive improvements to the literacy achievement of students. A multiple case study approach allowed me to study each case in depth on an individual basis as well as looking across cases for similarities and differences (Yin, 2014). By understanding the complexities of each case and the factors that bind each case together, I sought to provide a rich description of principals' perceptions and a deep analysis of the experiences that have resulted in their perception of their work as literacy leaders.

My work with case study methodology is grounded in a constructivist paradigm that recognizes that truth is relative and depends largely on one's perspective. Constructivist theory acknowledges "the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.10). Through storytelling, a constructivist approach enables the researcher to explore how participants construct their own knowledge of the phenomenon and reflect on their experiences. Based on these stories, the researcher can better understand participants' actions as they describe their views of reality.

Case study research seeks to research “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). My unit of analysis is elementary school principals and their perceptions as literacy leaders. Baxter and Jack (2008) warn that “one of the common pitfalls associated with case study is that there is a tendency for researchers to answer a question that is too broad or a topic that has too many objectives” (p. 546). Yin (2014) and Stake (1995), therefore, advise that researchers place boundaries around the case. My case is bounded by a focus on the perceptions of elementary principals. The exploration of this case study does not, therefore, go beyond participants’ own accounts.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Leithwood et al. (2004) provide a “common set of ‘basic’ leadership practices used by successful leaders in most circumstances” to influence student learning: setting direction, developing people, and making the organization work (p. 2). These leadership practices formed the conceptual framework, through which I explored the research questions in this dissertation study. My theory, as I embarked on this study, was that principals would describe their perceptions of literacy leadership as, in some sense, setting the direction, developing the school personnel, and creating systems that increased the literacy development of children in high-need elementary schools. The interview questions formed a basis for discovering how exactly principals described these sets of basic leadership practices. By virtue of their leadership role in schools, principals influence the entire approach a school takes in literacy education through either their actions or lack of actions in this area. This approach directly influences the literacy

practices that occur on a daily basis within that school. Little research has been conducted on principals' perceptions of their role in literacy leadership and the basic leadership practices they employ to enact this role.

### **Research Questions**

My research questions are:

- How do principals of high-need elementary schools perceive their role as a literacy leader?
- How do principals of high-need elementary school describe their actions to improve literacy learning?

### **Selection of Participants**

Participants were selected on the criteria that they work in a high-need elementary school based on qualification for Title I funds as a schoolwide program (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). I also sought participants who worked at schools with varying school performance levels in literacy achievement based on state department of education rating systems. A pool of participants were located from recommendations of university faculty, school district leaders, principals, and teachers. After I obtained a pool of candidates, I selected participants for their ability to be instrumental to studying the research questions and maximizing my understanding of the research focus (Stake, 1995).

Two principals at high-performing schools and four principals at low-performing schools granted me permission to interview them for the study. The participants represented two districts in two different western states. I used state and district databases to ascertain school status as high-need and determine whether each school was

considered high-performing or low-performing. State formulas for designation of performance level varied across states and were based on standardized achievement tests, which were different for each state.

Participants ranged in age from the mid-thirties to fifties. Racial and gender composition of the participants were: one Asian male, two White females, one White male, one Hispanic female, and one Hispanic male. Table 1 represents the participants' professional experience in schools and the rating of their current site based on state performance frameworks.

***Table 1. Participant Professional Education Experience in Years***

Principal Name	School-State Rating	At Current Site	Principal at Site	Total Principal Experience	Teaching Experience	Other Education Experience
Mr. Taylor	Bennett (LP)	5	5	5	7	0
Ms. Sanchez	Vista del Sol (HP)	2	2	2	10+	4
Mr. Li	Carter (LP)	1	1	4	3	9
Mr. Correa	Cottonwood (HP)	5	2	2	3	5
Ms. Martinelli	Mountain-ridge (LP)	4	4	4	10+	1
Mr. Schmidt	Espinar (LP)	2	2	2	9	3

- LP= Low-performing HP= High-performing

### **Data Collection Methods/Procedures**

To understand principals' perceptions of their ability to support literacy instruction, I relied on in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol (Appendix A). Two to three interviews were conducted at sites convenient to the participants. At the

initial meeting, I conducted a semi-structured interview which introduced the first interview questions and presented an opportunity for the participant to provide a general narrative about their development as an educational professional and their opportunities to learn about how to best implement effective literacy instruction with students. This interview was purposefully more open-ended in order to allow for participants to discuss issues of literacy leadership that came foremost to their minds so as to ascertain the primary perceptions of each participant as they discussed the research topic.

All interviews were transcribed. The data from the first interview was coded and analyzed prior to the second interview. The second interview was more structured, focusing on targeted questions. Because the first interview allowed for participants to discuss their perceptions in a more open-ended manner, second interview questions were also tailored based on an analysis of the data from the first interview and included topics that the participant did not discuss during the first interview. Third interviews were conducted if there was a need to revisit pertinent information or deepen my understanding of the case.

Throughout the research process, I sought to understand both the uniqueness of each principals' experiences and perceptions, as well as their commonalities (Stake, 1995), as they make sense of their role as a literacy leader. Interviews provided an opportunity to ask questions that encouraged participants to connect their current understandings and practices to their prior experiences (Merriam, 1998). This connection to the past is essential for the usefulness of this particular study to the field of education. By uncovering patterns of common experiences that have either helped or hindered

principals' development as literacy leaders, I hope that this study will provide valuable information to those who work with the preparation and ongoing development of principals.

Merriam (1998) states that interviews are the best data collection practice when a researcher is conducting intensive case studies of a number of individuals. My research involved exactly this sort of intensive study of six participants. Merriam (1998) also suggests that interviews are a productive way of collecting data on participants with a wide range of thoughts and conceptions about the study focus. Interviews provided me with a forum through which I could uncover both convergent and divergent perceptions and experiences of principals, which is important to the potential transferability of the conclusions. Transcription can be considered a key phase of data analysis within interpretive qualitative methodology (Bird, 2005). All interviews were recorded, and I transcribed all interviews myself.

The descriptions of school contexts are a combination of participant accounts and public information I gathered through internet searches of district and state data. Because the participants were immersed in the terminology of their district and state, I conducted internet searches in order to become more fully informed about the policies and processes that were particular to each participant's context.

### **Confidentiality**

Proper names of participants, schools, and districts have been given pseudonyms. Literacy models that are commonly used by large numbers of schools/districts were not

given pseudonyms in order to retain the integrity of the description of these widely-used resources. Specific literacy programs and companies were provided with pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously within a period of 11 months. Through an inductive process, I brought together evidence, reviewed the evidence, and identified patterns in order to form a theoretical understanding of the research focus (Newby, 2014). Lichtman (2005) asserts that “analyzing qualitative data is more than just looking for themes that are supported with quotes drawn from the raw data” (p. 244). Based on this important conception of qualitative data analysis, I followed the process outlined by Lichtman (2005) whereby the researcher moves through the raw data transcript by developing key concepts in three phases. In an effort to maintain the integrity of each participant’s perceptions, early in the coding process I made a conscious choice not to fit the data into generic categories, but to allow the individual and unique perceptions of each participant guide the specific codes that emerged from the interview data.

Coding was conducted in three iterations for each individual case. I began the first cycle with codes that described, with minimal interpretation, the nature of principals’ perceptions and experiences as leaders of literacy instruction. Initial codes for each interview were recorded in notes on the margin of a paper copy of the transcript.

Of second cycle coding, Saldana summarizes an approach outlined by Lewis and Silver (2007):

Before categories are assembled, your data may have to be recoded because more accurate words or phrases were discovered for the original codes; some codes will be merged together because they are conceptually similar; infrequent codes will be assessed for their utility in the overall coding scheme; and some codes that seemed like good ideas during First Cycle coding may be dropped altogether because they are later deemed ‘marginal’ or ‘redundant’ after the data corpus has been fully reviewed. (Saldana, 2013, p. 206)

During the second iteration, I revisited initial codes across the interviews with each participant and extended my analysis through axial coding (Saldana, 2013). Through this process, I was able to determine dominant codes and select codes that best represented the emerging themes. Significant phrases were recorded under categories that included initial codes. Some codes became major topics and, therefore, remained as categories. Other codes were organized as subsets within categories or combined under a code that became a category. Categories were revisited and collapsed into concepts during the third iteration (Appendix B).

After all interviews were conducted, I proceeded to a cross-case analysis. I analyzed common codes across all interviews to see patterns among the accounts, as well as the unique experiences of individuals. An important consideration during this step in the process was to see not only commonalities that emerged, but to also see the tensions and nuanced differences within these patterns. I integrated the results into an in-depth description of principals’ perceptions and experiences as literacy leaders, keeping in mind disconfirming evidence throughout the process. After cross-case conclusions had been made, I provided participants with an opportunity to validate the findings, make suggestions for revisions, and provide clarifications.



### **Pilot Study**

In preparation, I conducted a pilot study during the spring of 2016. I interviewed one principal at a high-need elementary school. Through three approximately one-hour interviews, my participant provided me with rich data on his perceptions and experiences as a principal and literacy leader. The perceptions he shared enabled me to reflect on and make changes to my research study design. Through this process, I refined my interview questions in order to elicit a clearer understanding of principals' perceptions of their work as literacy leaders. I created additional probing questions to broaden topics discussed.

### **Validation of Naturalistic Generalization**

There are many purposes to the sharing of findings through case study research, and the issue of generalizability has been discussed at length in the literature on case studies. The generalizations appropriate to case studies have been termed "naturalistic generalizations" (Stake, 1995, p. 86). Stake and Trumbull (1982) describe these generalizations as "self-generated knowings" that occur when new experience is added to old for each individual reader. In this sense, the concept of naturalistic generalization is very similar to Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) in that each reader transacts with the research based on their own experience, taking away from the content what is most relevant and applicable to them. In reference to naturalistic generalizations, Stake describes the audience considerations that writers of case studies must attend to as they craft their representations of the case or cases studied:

Our readers often are more familiar with the cases than we researchers are. They can add their own parts of the story. We should allow some of this input to analysis to help form reader generalizations. The reader will take both our

narrative description and our assertions: narrative descriptions to form vicarious experience and naturalistic generalizations, assertions to work with existing propositional knowledge to modify existing generalizations. (Stake, 1995, p. 85)

In the transactive nature of reading as an act, the meanings that my audience ascribes to this research study will partially be circumscribed by my portrayal of principals' perceptions of their role as literacy leaders and partially shaped by their own experiences of school life.

## **Chapter 4: The Cases**

### **Introduction**

This research investigated six principals' perceptions of their role in leading literacy. This chapter portrays the six individual cases in an attempt to answer the two research questions guiding this dissertation study:

- How do principals of high-need elementary schools perceive their role as a literacy leader?
- How do principals of high-need elementary school describe their actions to improve literacy learning?

Each participant and I explored their unique conceptions of literacy leadership through a series of interviews that guided participants to reflect on how they perceive their ability to improve literacy learning and the ways they enact these perceptions in their daily work as a principal within a high-need elementary school. The analysis in this chapter presents each individual's story as a distinct case. Chapter 5 will present an analysis of themes across these cases.

Because this research seeks to look broadly at the participants' conceptions of themselves as literacy leaders, I sought to allow for themes from each participant to emerge from the interviews based on the particular values and conceptions the participant placed on literacy and their descriptions of the logical enactments of these values and

conceptions. It was important to me, as a researcher, to avoid leading principals by forcing particular themes to come forward through the interview process. Hence, beyond the initial three headings of “school context,” “participant’s background,” and “role of the principal,” themes will be described that are unique to each participant.

### **Mr. Taylor**

#### **School Context**

Each time I entered Bennett Elementary to interview Mr. Taylor, there was always a great deal of activity in the lobby of the school. Tables and chairs were arranged there for meetings between parents and community members in order to support the families of students at Bennett. Awards for students who had met reading goals were displayed prominently on one of the walls. During my second interview, a large book fair had been erected there so that people could not miss it upon entering the building. And the offices were arranged so that there was not the sense of separation between the principal’s office and the rest of the school; adults and children flowed in and out of the area communally.

During the time of this study, Bennett Elementary School served 474 students, 89% of whom are eligible to receive free lunch and 7% of whom are eligible to receive a reduced lunch price. An urban school in a western state, 79% of the students were Hispanic. There were no other racial or ethnic groups that comprised a substantial percentage of the remaining students.

Bennett implemented an early exit model of bilingual education where English Language Learners receive a majority of their instruction in their primary language,

which was Spanish, from kindergarten through third grade. As well, they received English as a Second Language (ESL) services in order to develop their English language proficiency. Mr. Taylor explained that, historically in the district where he works, the goal set out for teachers is “to transition kids to English definitely for a majority of their day, especially in fourth and fifth.” However, Mr. Taylor expressed a difference of opinion with district policy: “Philosophically, I don’t really believe in this idea of transitioning. I really believe in biliteracy, which is if you come in speaking Spanish, I want you to leave speaking Spanish and English so we’ve kind of made this shift especially for next year where we really want a strong Spanish speaking teacher in fifth grade and a really strong Spanish speaking teacher in fourth grade, because in third grade they’re getting a lot of Spanish.”

As indicated by the activity in the school lobby, Mr. Taylor placed importance on his effort to create a school that “has a lot of community.” The community of the school played a central role in Mr. Taylor’s value for building individual relationships between the children and adults. A tutoring program, Reading Tutors, implemented at the school was a feature Mr. Taylor pointed to as a community builder, because it brought in people from all over the city to work individually with children in need of reading support.

### **Participant’s Background**

Mr. Taylor had been a principal for five years, all of those spent at the same school. He had obtained his teaching license through an alternative teacher preparation program and taught third, fourth, and fifth grade for seven years. Prior to working within the field of education, Mr. Taylor described himself as “coming from the

business world.” He said that, as a child growing up just a few blocks away from a university, he had always loved to read. During his time as a teacher, Mr. Taylor described his main literacy support as a “fabulous coach” and a “very good team.”

Mr. Taylor portrayed himself as being knowledgeable about Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop, a method of literacy instruction based on the whole language philosophy of the late 80s and 90s. “I would say I felt very, very comfortable with the Reader’s/Writer’s workshop model in terms of I have a bunch of kids on front of me, I know what my plan is for the next few weeks as far as how I want them to figure out author’s craft or whatever and really want to get that across. What I think I did not have very good training in and hope that some of the things that my current teachers are getting more of is this ability one-on-one, if I’m sitting across from you and you’re struggling with something...I didn’t really know what to do as a teacher in the classroom when I was sitting across from a struggling reader.” Mr. Taylor perceived a contrast between whole language instruction and individualized support for students, emphasizing that he was very comfortable as a teacher with the former type of literacy instruction.

Reflecting on his ability to provide guidance to teachers, he gave an example of a classroom observation where students were not as actively engaged as he would want. After such an observation, he discussed that he might make the following sort of comment to the teacher: “Let’s get down to a 20-minute whole group and let’s use the rest of that time within the Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop for small group instruction.” Mr. Taylor’s description of this scenario reflected his understanding of how whole language should be enacted in the classroom, as well as his own desire to be more

actively engaged as a learner who would not “want to sit there and listen.” It also served to highlight the dichotomy he perceived between whole language and individualized instruction.

As Mr. Taylor progressed in his teaching, he stated that he became good at “guided reading as far as this ability to kind of sit down with a group of three or four kids and really lean in and hear what you’re doing and then give you just a little something to work on and then kind of continue down the line.” He described this step in his development as a teacher as “a bit of a graduation from the whole group to a little bit more of the small group practice.”

Due to the participant’s teaching experience in the upper elementary grades and the focus on whole language as a teacher, he indicated that he did not have training or experience in the science of reading—foundational skills of literacy instruction—that enable a stronger focus on the individualized needs of students resulting from observations and assessment data. He believed himself to be less able to pick out and analyze the extent to which certain factors in reading instruction, such as phonics elements, were adequately and appropriately covered in a teacher’s instruction based on the developmental needs of the students.

### **Role of the Principal**

Mr. Taylor noted that he did not perceive his role as involving consistent and direct individualized discussions with teachers about literacy instruction. The expectations of the principalship included many roles, but he felt it “unreasonable to be the instructional expert in the building *and* do all the other things that you’re supposed to

do as a principal.” As he made this point, he connected this perception with the fact that he did not feel as competent as other principals at working within the realm of foundational literacy skills. Mr. Taylor summarized this sentiment in saying, “If someone turned around and talked to me about my philosophy on reading, I don’t think I would jump into instructional practices. It’s just not who I am.”

Whereas Mr. Taylor expressed a less direct role in classroom practices associated with literacy, he took a very hands-on and direct approach to encouraging student independent reading. He stated that his fundamental belief was that “reading should be really, really fun” and that the “foundation has to be this joy of reading.” In the effort to increase reading volume at Bennett Elementary School, he went to every classroom every Friday morning to personally hand out awards.

The awards were based on the number of minutes students read and part of the incentive program included with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reading. Minutes were recorded on a home reading log, signed by a parent, and then entered into a schoolwide database by teachers. “Teachers are tracking it, and the beautiful thing about it is that the principal actually comes in every single Friday morning to every single class and says, ‘Where are we at?’ Every Friday for the last four years, that’s my Friday morning, first two hours is just going around and congratulating kids on how much they’ve read. And trying to get kids to, a big part of the program but also a big part of the role is that I’m just a large cheerleader in the building that’s trying to encourage kids and celebrate academic success and social-emotional success.” This practice mirrored a role Mr. Taylor commonly spoke about during our three interviews, that of knowing and forming relationships with each



child in order to increase the achievement and the well-being of each student at the school.

Belief in the importance of reading volume, or reading practice, also formed a common thread in the interviews. This weekly ritual allowed for Mr. Taylor to form his own personal relationship with each child on an occasion that provided praise for reading volume. The participant expressed ambivalence about presenting external rewards to children for reading, recognizing that intrinsic motivation is an ultimate goal for reading, but he believed it was a necessary reality given all of the other entertainment choices that entice children away from reading.

### **Leadership Structure**

Rather than take on the role of providing direct feedback to teachers about literacy instruction, Mr. Taylor developed a distributed leadership model that began in his first year as the principal and continued to develop throughout his tenure at the school. When the grant funding for a reading interventionist position ended, Mr. Taylor decided to make what he called a “controversial” move. He hired three instructional coaches in place of the one reading interventionist in order to move from a structure with one employee who worked directly with struggling readers to a structure with three coaches who worked directly with teachers to increase their ability to meet the literacy needs of all students.

Mr. Taylor described this as a “coaching model to bring everyone up in the building.” Teacher support and their continual development as professionals factored into Mr. Taylor’s reasoning for creating a distributed leadership model. He referred to it as

“setting up the structures in the school so that teachers are getting support whether that’s from me or not.”

This model continued to develop through a district initiative. During the time of the interviews, there were five teachers in differentiated roles, called “senior team leads,” who came out of the classroom half of the time to support a case load of teachers. According to Mr. Taylor, senior team leads provided guidance to teachers to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the level of assistance and guidance a teacher needs. He mentioned that the district supported the model and was partially financing classroom release time for senior team leads across many schools. He summarized the development of this model and the logic behind it: “I taught for seven years and I felt like I was a good reading teacher, but I would have loved to have had a lot more instruction. What I’ve done now is I’ve just hired a bunch of really good teachers and a bunch of coaches to hire teachers, and we have distributed leadership where teachers are coming out of the classroom and they’re coaching other teachers.” In conjunction with district support, Mr. Taylor had moved into a model of leadership that supported teachers through ongoing coaching provided by senior team leads.

### **Curricular Resources**

A major way that Mr. Taylor perceived his support of teachers in literacy instruction was through the adoption of a reading program, which he described as a “tool or a resource” to put everyone “on the same page.” At the same time that Mr. Taylor began his position, the school was awarded a large grant. He sought advice from district

experts about how to spend this funding, and they recommended 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reading program.

Mr. Taylor described the curriculum as providing a series of leveled books and a guide for teaching reading at each grade level. Through the curriculum, teachers who had less expertise were given concrete directions to follow with struggling readers based on their individual needs. This was a key asset to this curriculum, given Mr. Taylor's stated emphasis on foundational skills and individual instruction to meet the needs of children.

In a high-need school that was stretched for experienced teachers, the educational publishing company also provided professional development (PD). Mr. Taylor purposefully attended this PD in full despite the ever-pressing demands of the job, believing that it was important as a leader to show the value he placed on it by being present. He described that, when he was a teacher, he did not appreciate when principals were not present at PD. He defined this leadership move as modeling to his staff that he was also a learner.

Through the curriculum, the participant perceived that both he and the teachers were learning about the comprehensive aspects of teaching reading and how to instruct students to maximize literacy achievement. On a number of occasions, Mr. Taylor referred to the curriculum to describe his pedagogical understanding of the reading process. For instance, in our first interview, he discussed the way that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reading Program directed teachers to teach sight words. "So one tool is just this idea of power words. Power words are your most common or frequent words that your kids see. Some of these words are not, phonologically you can't pronounce them. You need to just

memorize them. You need to just know them. I mean these are your high frequency words. And so working with these kids just on these lists of words, I don't get really excited about it, but I also understand the research behind it. And if kids know these 50 words right here and they are going to come across these 50 words 85% of the time in these books, this is what you need to know next. So this would be a great next step for you." It appeared from such references to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reading that the participant had, to some extent, acquired knowledge of literacy instructional practices through the curriculum. In turn, when he discussed conversations with teachers about reading data, the vocabulary used in the curricular materials, such as "power words," provided a common language through which the staff formed a dialogue about instructional practices and students' progress in literacy.

Mr. Taylor emphasized that he did not think that the curriculum was the "end-all be-all." However, given the fact that he came in at a point when the school was one of the very lowest performing in a large urban district, he made a strong and consistent stand over his five years at the school that all teachers would use the curriculum with fidelity. "I'd say the leadership move that I did was making sure that everyone understood was we had very few non-negotiables, but the nonnegotiable was that everyone will use this reading program. And everyone will use it with fidelity, and that's something we've kind of kept up over the past four years." He described this leadership move as one that created cohesion among staff as to how they were teaching reading.

## **Individualized Instruction**

Across the three interviews, Mr. Taylor made a clear distinction between whole group reading instruction and individualized instruction. This dichotomy was mirrored in his perceptions of himself as a teacher who had mastered whole group teaching but had not mastered the ability to meet the individual needs of students. Perhaps because of this emphasis on individualized instruction, Mr. Taylor had worked to bring in resources that provided one-on-one opportunities for the students at Bennett.

In making the decision to use 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reading as a unified curriculum throughout the grades, Mr. Taylor was excited by the fact that the program had a diagnostic component that enabled teachers to assess students regularly and then provide individualized guidance to each child. An ideal he expressed was that the educational staff would know “exactly where kids are” in reading all the time.

To augment the one-on-one experience of children in literacy, Mr. Taylor brought in a tutoring program, Reading Tutors, which provided individualized reading instruction to struggling readers at the school. He described, “They are 75 volunteers that come in and read with kids twice a week for 45 minutes. What’s very cool is there’s a full-time coordinator that trained the volunteers on how to be successful when reading with kids. And what I think that means is some research-based practice and really kind of showing how to ask some of these prompts or these questions.” This program operated during the entire school day through a paid director and volunteers. He emphasized an aspect of Reading Tutors that he especially appreciated was “that it’s someone who’s coming in from outside the school that is most likely passionate about reading, and they get to share

that with kids. So that kids have another adult model of how important reading is.” He also connected the school with a program, Reading Friends, through which company employees called children via a classroom computer and listened to them read.

### **Centrality of the Teacher**

On a number of occasions, as Mr. Taylor described the resources he had brought to the school to build individualized reading instruction, he made sure to put these resources in perspective by stating his own belief that teachers were central in moving children from one level of reading to the next. Because of his belief that children learn best through engagement, Mr. Taylor discussed the importance of hiring engaging teachers and made it clear that he believed that engaging did not mean “loud,” “obnoxious,” or entertainment-oriented teaching. He also placed emphasis on the fact that he did not require teachers to be perfect, but that he did require that they have a “growth mindset.”

Because the participant saw teachers as the most impactful employee in the child’s education at school, many of his strategies for reading achievement were ultimately focused on the teacher’s development. This focus was seen in the use of 21<sup>st</sup> Century as an instructional tool, through which the participant perceived teachers to be learning best practices in teaching literacy. It was also reflected in the participant’s decision to move away from a model that placed the responsibility for every struggling reader on one reading interventionist in one of the lowest achieving schools in the district. Seeing this as a losing proposition, the participant made the decision to redistribute those financial resources tied up in one reading interventionist and move into

a distributed leadership model with the goal of educating every teacher on how to best teach literacy through individual coaching by senior team leads. This particular decision was later mirrored in the district's decision to create a similar model of leadership distribution, which was then implemented in many of the high-need schools within this district.

Based on his background as a child who loved to read and his experience as a teacher during the whole language movement, which emphasized enjoyment of reading through Reader's Workshop, Mr. Taylor believed it was important to inspire kids to read through read aloud, which involved the teacher reading a book to students as a whole group. He discussed the importance of teachers conducting read aloud in a passionate way, because he believed it instills a love of reading. He also emphasized that during read aloud time, children should have the book and follow along in order to increase their reading practice.

### **Data Use**

A main means through which the participant found opportunities to engage K-1 teachers in analysis and critical thinking about their own teaching of reading came through charting data and the use of these charts as a focal point for conversations about teaching. During our second interview, the participant directed me to the charts covering the better part of two walls and explained that the information represented the assessments of K-1 students in the school. Every six weeks, he met with grade level groups of kindergarten-1 teachers to have conversations about the progress of each student. Staff discussed students who were not progressing and intentionally targeted

strategies to increase the performance of these struggling readers. During the next six-week data conversation, the participant focused back on these struggling readers to discuss whether they had moved up in reading levels. If progress had been made, he led conversations with teachers that drew out the strategies that had worked with each child.

During post-observation conferences, Mr. Taylor expressed that he was less likely to feel confident in providing specific instructional feedback to teachers based on foundational literacy skills. In contrast, he spoke with confidence about giving feedback on engagement during read aloud and mini-lessons, both of which are important components of the whole language philosophy and main aspects of the instruction provided to the participant during his preparation as a teacher. However, despite his expressed trepidation about providing feedback on foundational literacy skills during post-observation conferences with teachers, it appeared that the six-week data meetings afforded an opportunity for him to engage in conversations about reading instruction in a way that was more comfortable for him.

### **Key Findings**

Even though Mr. Taylor did not perceive himself to be knowledgeable about foundational literacy skills, there were many instances during which he demonstrated knowledge of components that make up the underlying process involved in learning how to read. During our second interview, as the participant expanded on ways that he provided teachers with feedback through data analysis, it became apparent that the curriculum had become a part of the participant's foundational knowledge about literacy instruction. With a lack of initial experiences in understanding the science of reading, the



participant appeared to have made use of the literacy program to fill gaps in his knowledge. The curriculum also provided a common language through which the principal and staff could talk about reading instruction at the school.

Another means through which Mr. Taylor continued to learn about literacy instruction was through the data charts and the related meetings that occurred every six weeks. Because the data targeted elements that were important at various developmental levels of reading, these charts became a focal point through which a dialogue could occur between the group members in order to understand what worked and what was needed for increased student reading performance.

Whereas the participant stated that he was not as comfortable giving feedback on what he observed during literacy instruction through one-on-one principal-teacher conferences, the group setting presented an opportunity for teachers to share strategies that were working based on evidence from the data charts. Mr. Taylor described times when he acted as the leader and facilitator during these conversations. He provided praise for increases in student reading scores and led discussions during which teachers could explain effective strategies. In this way, Mr. Taylor was able to facilitate meetings without having to provide specific ideas he did not feel he could give about literacy instruction.

Hence, data conversations became a means of focusing on a number of the participant's values. Data provided information on individual children and spotlighted the central role of the teacher as an instructor of reading. Conversations about data pinpointed the curriculum as an important means of making achievements gains in

literacy. The data charts brought opportunities to support teacher growth, highlighting the effective work of certain teachers that could then be used as advice for others. It also enabled the participant to be involved in coaching and learning at the same time through dialogic exchanges between educational professionals, some of whom he believed to know more about literacy instruction than him. These discussions then supported the participant's ongoing learning about foundational literacy skills, a stated deficit, because the elements of the reading process were included in the data charts.

### **Ms. Sanchez**

#### **School Context**

It was a week before school started when Ms. Sanchez and I met for our first interview. She came rushing into the coffee shop on a Sunday morning after going to Vista del Sol, the school where she works, to unlock the doors of the building for what she described as a "line of teachers" waiting to get in to prepare for the school year. Vista del Sol Elementary School is situated in an urban area in a southwestern state. In describing the recent history of the school, Ms. Sanchez said that four years ago the school had received a grade of F from the school evaluation system implemented at the state level. They had worked their way up to a B since that time.

As the largest elementary school in the district, with a population of 946 students at the time of this study, Ms. Sanchez was one of the two principals who ran the school. It was Ms. Sanchez' second year as a principal at Vista del Sol, and it would be the other principals' first year there. She described last year as a "take stock" year.

Because of the unusually large numbers of students in the Student Assistance Team process, which is the state Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, Ms. Sanchez said she panicked during her first year as a principal at Vista del Sol. She described the school as having a “huge number of students who receive special education services” and that they had created a “monster” that relied on referrals for special education rather than sound classroom instruction. Low performance in literacy was a main reason for these referrals. Of the staff, Ms. Sanchez said that there were “a lot of teachers who were trying their best with what they had and what they understood.”

### **Participant’s Background**

Ms. Sanchez perceived her passion for literacy leadership as being “a little bit different” than other principals, because she “didn’t know how to teach reading” after she had graduated from her teacher preparation program. Her initial teacher training was in general education, special education, and ESL. During her first year as a teacher, she had an inclusion classroom with bilingual students, half of whom were designated as requiring special educational services. Her inability to meet the needs of her students based on her lack of preparation presented a professional crisis that caused her to continually seek out more and more knowledge, most specifically in the area of teaching literacy. A first step to meet the needs of her students in reading was to seek help from the reading specialist at the school.

Ms. Sanchez taught every grade except third grade in her twelve years as a special education and general education teacher. During that time, she attended extensive PD on various approaches to teaching literacy, such as Orton-Gillingham (Orton, 1937

Gillingham & Stillman, 1956; Gillingham & Stillman, 1960), Aspire, and the Comprehensive Literacy Model. In addition, she was trained in Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) and worked as a Reading Recovery specialist for three years. While she was pursuing a Master of Arts in Special Education, Ms. Sanchez “started putting everything together” in regard to her conceptual understanding of literacy instruction. She used this knowledge as a special education instructional leader at a school where she provided PD and oversaw school compliance to ensure the provision of designated instructional services for students with special educational needs. In addition, for many years she had taught language arts methods courses to pre-service teachers at a nearby university.

In regard to her philosophy of reading instruction, Ms. Sanchez described an evolution of thought, “I think for me I got to a point where it was like, I don’t care about all the different theories and philosophies that overlay, I just need to focus on what I know is going to work.” Through the participant’s many trainings in reading instruction, the participant juxtaposed her understandings of whole language with more phonics-based approaches such as Orton-Gillingham (Orton, 1937 Gillingham & Stillman, 1956; Gillingham & Stillman, 1960). “I think for the longest time I was very whole language based. Reading Recovery is whole language, except it doesn’t work for everybody. So when I started to doing it, I was like, why isn’t this working? I don’t get it. I’m one-on-one with them. Why am I not understanding this? But then once I got trained in Orton-Gillingham, I kind of started to make that connection. And that was maybe after five to six years teaching. Because I was like wait, this isn’t working still. I know I have all this knowledge, and it’s not working, so what do I do? And being able to understand that.”

As she spoke of the needs of the children at Vista del Sol throughout our interviews, the participant referenced the dichotomies of top-down and bottom-up theories of reading that had historically been formed throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Role of the Principal**

Ms. Sanchez considered 80% of her job as a principal to be the work of an instructional leader and that the goal of this work was to ensure a trajectory of college readiness skills beginning in kindergarten. In describing this role as an instructional leader specifically in terms of literacy she said, “It’s going in, supporting teachers, showing them how to teach reading foundational skills and how to move on from that in order to make sure we’re not missing any kids as they go up in the grades.”

Of instructional leadership as a principal, she said, “I just don't see how people would not think that you have to instructionally know what you're doing in order to be a principal. And of course you can muddle through it. You can always find people who do, right? Because that's what you typically do. You're a great leader. I can pull these teachers in to help me, but it's not the same.”

Ms. Sanchez described a very hands-on style of working directly with teachers on their literacy instruction. Because of the participant’s extensive knowledge of literacy pedagogy, she often described herself as “going in, supporting teachers, showing them how to teach reading foundational skills and how to move on from that in order to make sure we’re not missing any kids as they go up in the grades.” She discussed her use of walk-throughs and her love of being in classrooms, emphasizing that she does not just

“go and watch and sit” because that’s “not helpful” and makes teachers nervous. There were many instances when the participant spoke of specific programs and instructional practices for which she was an expert, such as the Words Their Way (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2015) curriculum, and described how she would “show teachers how to do that” and explain the reason why a particular strategy was an effective practice.

In regard to setting a school climate, her top priority was that school personnel view the children at Vista del Sol in an inclusive way. “This year is the first year that were actually kind of just coming together with a common mission for the school. I think you kind of have to start there before you start getting into the curriculum piece. So our understanding that all students can learn. Our understanding that they're all of our students. We're all responsible for them, not this is my kid and this is your kid. That collective responsibility we're talking a lot about.” Ms. Sanchez discussed the fact that the state evaluation system for teachers impacted the collective sense of ownership for the education of every child. “And it's hard especially when you're talking about evaluation systems, too...So it's like I understand that this is your caseload, but we are all responsible for the students.”

Because of the participant’s extensive knowledge of special education and in response to the unusually high numbers of students referred to special education for potential reading disabilities, another role that Ms. Sanchez took on was the complete restructuring of the RTI system. Her plan during her second year at Vista del Sol was to stabilize Tier 1 instruction by insisting on fidelity to the newly purchased Engaged Literacy Program and redefine Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction.

In the future, she planned to engage the district in a conversation about the effectiveness of the current system of Tier 3 instruction, delivered through a program called Reading Revival. Reading Revival required an interventionist who worked with a limited number of students, but there were many more students at the school who needed intervention than Reading Revival could accommodate. The fact that she was focused on having a conversation with the district about Reading Revival demonstrated her willingness to act as a partner with district personnel for the purpose of making the best decision regarding Tier 3 instruction for Vista del Sol. It also demonstrated that she saw herself as a peer with specialists at the district level and was comfortable about sharing her own observations regarding the effectiveness of the program.

### **Curricular Resources**

Ms. Sanchez described the school year as being focused on “a lot of curriculum work,” and she had personally spent weeks during the summer immersed in the new curricular program, Engaged Literacy. Ms. Sanchez had been translating the program into a backward design format, pulling out Common Core standards and assessments (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), which the teachers would use to create lesson plans. She emphasized the importance for her as a principal of doing this work with the teachers, “We’re in there with them. We’re sitting with them. We’re talking about it. We’re talking about UDL” (Universal Design for Learning; CAST, 2011).

Ms. Sanchez expressed ambivalence toward using a reading program. “So my philosophy is not using a curriculum- period. But being in this position, there are people

that need to have something to hold on to in order to get to where they need to be... So when you have something like this, it helps teachers- even the teachers who have been teaching forever. They're like, 'Well we've kind of been just turning our wheels.' And I think that our data shows that we're spending our time, I mean we have hardworking teachers here, great teachers, but some of our scores aren't showing it. And yes, test scores aren't everything, but it's what we're graded on. So it's our reality right now." Given the large number of students who were either in special education or were currently in the referral process, the participant expressed hope that "we're going to see people on the same page for the first time in years."

Ms. Sanchez described the situation: "We've had a lot of students qualify for dyslexia, so we have a large percentage of that. I just find it hard to believe that it's not instruction that has created the deficits. We've never all been on the same page. So this grade level can use this, but this grade level is using a different curriculum. So then we're never consistent." Because of this lack of consistency, Ms. Sanchez explained she could not guarantee that adequate Tier 1 Instruction had been delivered at Vista del Sol. In addition to inconsistent instruction, the participant voiced concern over the types of activities that teachers were picking during the prior year, her first at the school. Her observations were that early grade teachers were using internet sites to find center-based lessons, which were supposedly aligned with the standards, but the mindset of the teachers were, "This is so cute. I'm going to color a letter A." The focus of these centers was not on targeted strategies and skills that would be taught if the teachers were using guided reading or mini-lessons consistently and correctly. In other words, well-defined



objectives for student literacy growth were missing from the centers teachers were employing in their classrooms.

In the upper grades, Ms. Sanchez' observations were that the lessons were based too much on "sit n 'git". The whole group discussions did not provide students with opportunities to learn how to talk with each other about texts. Teachers felt that this mode of delivering instruction ensured that all the needs of the students were covered, but Ms. Sanchez wanted the teachers to learn how to orchestrate different learning structures for the students in order increase genuine participation.

It was Ms. Sanchez' hope that the curriculum would provide the various structures to create optimal learning opportunities for students. Having spent weeks looking extensively at every aspect of the program, she explained that Engaged Literacy was divided into three different sections with a designated amount of time for each section, which would increase consistency of content delivery across the grade levels. She was adamant about the fact that the teachers would use the curriculum with fidelity, believing that consistent use of the program across grade levels would be the only way to stabilize Tier 1 instruction for all kids and begin the process of discerning which students in the school actually needed Tier 2 instruction and Tier 3 services based on true need, not based on poor quality of instruction.

Ms. Sanchez described the components of the curriculum: "I think kindergarten and first are going to focus a lot on phonemic awareness and making sure that they're actually hearing and being able to manipulate the sounds before we're even worrying about phonics. Because sometimes we skip that, and we go straight to phonics and we're

like, why aren't they reading? You know, why aren't they putting the words together? And it's because they can't hear it, and not understanding that. So it's going to build a foundation for K-1 and 2 with phonemic awareness and then it starts getting into the phonics and vocabulary. And as you keep going, it's more comprehension and complex text oriented. I think it's still going to have some time for those foundational skills, but I think the foundational skills for third, fourth, and fifth is more vocabulary oriented, like front-loading that vocabulary before they get to it, like: what did that mean? what does that word mean? how do I take it out of a text and really decompose what that meaning is? And how reading and writing is together, so I *do* like the curriculum because of that. Because it teaches teachers something they don't understand; that it's not separate.”

Through an in-depth study of the curriculum and sophisticated understanding of literacy pedagogy, the participant was able to create a mental schematic that laid out the trajectory of skills across the spectrum of the elementary student's experience and how Engaged Literacy matched that trajectory through its scope and sequence.

In addition to using Engaged Literacy consistently across the school, she also insisted that all teachers use a Universal Design for Learning lesson plan template. After getting push-back from the physical education teacher, she spent time taking him through a basketball lesson so that he would see how the template could be used in any subject area. Specifically in regard to literacy, the hope expressed by the participant was that the Universal Design for Learning (UDL; CAST, 2011) lesson would create the structure for teachers to consider how to differentiate for students prior to the delivery of literacy instruction.

## **Empowering Teachers**

Although Ms. Sanchez insisted that teachers use the Engaged Literacy with fidelity, she was clear about the fact that she did not want teachers to be mindless purveyors of a scripted curriculum. The work prior to the beginning of the school year was collaborative, sometimes lasting four hours, during which teachers were engaged in conversations that promoted critical thinking about the program. By the middle of the year, Ms. Sanchez was observing teachers' alterations to the program that maintained curricular fidelity while adjusting to the specific needs of the students. For instance, she was praising teachers for making modifications to create more engaging lessons.

The teachers' professional development plans (PDP), which are required by the state, were individualized based on the literacy data and how they were using Engaged Literacy to meet the needs of the students. Ms. Sanchez explained that there would be teacher input during a pre-conference when teachers would make joint decisions with the principal about their goals. These conversations would be based on the data from the reading assessments conducted during the previous year.

Because of the participant's extensive knowledge about literacy, she expressed that teachers were more likely to rely on her for advice. However, she felt that the teachers at the school "had more power and knowledge to control the situation in their classroom than they give themselves credit for." She let teachers know that she did not have all the answers and worked with teachers to rely on their own critical thinking skills in order to figure out how to meet the literacy needs of their students, providing advice and support in a way that scaffolded learning for teachers.

## **Restructuring Response to Intervention**

During her second year, Ms. Sanchez planned to focus on restructuring their approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. She gave what she considered an alarming example in which one-third of the second-grade students were currently referred to the Student Assistance Team (SAT) process, which considers whether students need supplemental and targeted individualized interventions. She expressed concern that students, who were not performing at grade level in literacy because of poor Tier 1 instruction, were being moved directly from Tier 1 instruction to Reading Revival. This was eating up resources for students who truly needed to be in Reading Revival, which was considered at the school to be the most intensive Tier 2 instruction. Ms. Sanchez was very specifically not comfortable with students being tested for special education if they had not received adequate phonics instruction.

The participant laid out a vision for the initial phases of Tier 2 instruction, delivered by general education teachers, which would provide specific literacy interventions for short periods of time to students who need it within the course of the daily classroom routine. These interventions would be increased by the general education teacher for students who were not responding adequately to the short interventions. She believed that this would eliminate many of the referrals to SAT. In addition, she wanted to flesh out the specific characteristics of the tiers in order to maximize the effectiveness of the RTI process. She expressed this need for redefining the tiers as a series of wonderings to be answered in the future: “If they do qualify for special ed. service, what

curriculum are we using that's different from Tier 1 or Tier 2? And does it need to be different? Or are we just increasing the intensity? We're having all these conversations, because we're seeing the same curriculum for Tier 2 and Tier 3. Well, if it didn't work in Tier 2, it's probably not going to work in Tier 3." As a part of the restructuring process, Ms. Sanchez was focused on using assessment data to figure out which literacy interventions were actually proving to be effective. Based on this knowledge, she foresaw the need to make crucial decisions about the type and intensity of various levels of intervention.

By the middle of her second year at Vista del Sol, Ms. Sanchez had developed a preliminary plan for RTI that was being implemented. This involved putting two of the literacy specialists in charge of the process and creating criteria for student referrals. It also involved reconstituting SAT teams so that they included teachers from different grade levels and specials teachers from physical education, art, and music. In the absence of district direction, Ms. Sanchez created more specific definitions of Tier 2 and 3 based on amount of time and intensity of instruction, as well as type of instruction.

### **Data Use**

Ms. Sanchez indicated that the school had flown "under the radar for a very long time" when it came to using data in order to make decisions. She made a point of discussing the fact that a "snapshot" of a classroom, through observations or a walk-through, may present a very different portrait than the actual achievement of students based on data. She described one example where the literacy centers and the guided reading instruction appeared to be meaningful and yet the students had the lowest scores

on the DIBELS. As an instructional leader, her move was to work with the teachers to “dig down” into the assessment data to find out more specific information that could be used to inform future instruction. She discussed two examples.

In the first example, a teacher was using running records in order to discuss the reading levels of students but was not looking more closely at the miscues the student was making. Ms. Sanchez could see the student’s miscues indicated the student was not making meaning from the text, but the teacher was only looking at the more surface indicators of the level of text being read by the student when the running record had been conducted.

In the second example, the early grade teachers were using the colored graph of DIBELS data to discuss student growth, but they were not looking at the more detailed information within the color-bands in order to make specific decisions about instructional practices that were needed for particular students. She described the teachers as using the assessment for compliance rather than as a tool. With less expertise in the new computerized version of the DIBELS and limited time to work on this specific issue, Ms. Sanchez asked the district instructional coach to come in every Wednesday and “make it worthwhile for teachers and just show them nitty-gritty and how to understand what it means and how to group the kids.” In the end, Ms. Sanchez explained, “I spent all year getting buy-in. This is useful. This is what it’s telling you. What you do with your instruction? And then this summer, they took it away. So we’re not using DIBELS anymore. The state took it away.” The participant explained that the state was now moving to Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) as an assessment tool.

These two examples demonstrate the participant's ongoing conversations with teachers to take them to a more sophisticated analysis of the assessment data in order to make informed decisions about classroom instruction. In each case, the teachers at Vista del Sol were looking at more surface indications of how students were performing in literacy based on the data, and Ms. Sanchez sought to have them look more closely at the data in order to see fine-grained indications of student performance. The examples also highlight the frustration the participant felt when the state replaced an assessment tool teachers were just beginning to understand in depth and use with accuracy.

### **Key Findings**

Ms. Sanchez believed that consistent implementation of the Engaged Literacy program would act as a tourniquet to stop the constant influx of student referrals to more intensive tiers of reading interventions. Her expertise in special education could be seen in her school-wide insistence on high quality instruction at the Tier 1 level and her vision for redefining and systematizing Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction. While the participant acknowledged that curricular programs are limited, she also felt confident that she could lead the school in supplementing the curriculum, with programs such as Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2015), once they had discerned the holes that needed to be filled.

In the first year of implementation of a new curriculum, the participant envisioned that Engaged Literacy would provide a common language and structure through which conversations could occur to deepen teachers' understanding about how to teach literacy. Ms. Sanchez also sought to increase teachers' ability to accurately analyze assessment data through her own conversations with teachers and district-provided PD. Through the

use of the curriculum, a shared lesson plan format, and assessment data, Ms. Sanchez planned to empower teachers to deliver highly effective literacy instruction so that they would be less likely to seek questionable curricular resources and refer students to literacy interventions.

## **Mr. Li**

### **School Context**

As I waited in the lobby of Carter Elementary School for my first interview with Mr. Li, children occasionally walked in with their parents. A staff member sat at a desk near the entryway, and she directed them to their new classroom for the school year. It was the first day of school for many in the district, but Mr. Li explained to me that they had decided to use the next two days in order to allow time for teachers to meet parents and conduct individual reading assessments with students in their class.

Mr. Li led me down the hall to a work area, reminding a child to make sure to take a free book from the library. He explained, “We have just a lot of texts, we had different books that we wanted to give away, and we said rather than throw them away or donate them, let’s get books in kid’s hands and they can build an at-home library.” In an urban area that is socioeconomically stressed, this book might be the first one a child from the school has ever owned.

Carter Elementary is a school classified as “turnaround” in a large urban district. One of the changes that often takes place in schools with this designation is the hiring of a new principal who will lead the effort to improve the overall profile of the school, including literacy achievement outcomes. When the district sought a new principal, they



described Carter Elementary school to Mr. Li as needing “a lot of TLC” and discussed the fact that they really wanted someone who would make a commitment to the school, given the fact that it had experienced eight principals in four years.

In the year prior to this study, a new strategy for turnaround had just begun in the district. Rather than hire a principal in the summer and provide minimal lead time to begin the school year, the district had implemented a program that gave the new principal one year to learn about the school and create a plan before taking on the role of acting principal. At the time of the interviews with Mr. Li, he had just begun his first year as acting principal after spending a year getting ready to lead Carter Elementary.

As someone who had worked in high-need schools prior to his employment at Carter, Mr. Li recognized that it is not uncommon to “find children who have a very wide range of current reading ability or achievement levels.” He believed the challenge and opportunity for teachers in high-need schools is that “not only are you trying to figure out how to deliver this lesson but how you differentiate instruction in strategic ways for my struggling readers and for my advanced readers.”

### **Participant’s Background**

Mr. Li considered himself very fortunate to have experienced a rich literacy environment as a child, with an aunt who was an early literacy teacher and an older sister who modeled voracious reading. He now jokes with his mother that her “form of babysitting was to pack our lunches and drop us off at the library, and we would spend whole days just reading books.” He recalled reading books such as *Matilda* (Dahl, 1988)

and Russian folktales, crediting his childhood with the fact that he never viewed reading as a chore or experienced it as struggle, but rather felt a sense of joy about reading.

Although Mr. Li had an orientation toward literacy and performed well in language arts as a by-product of this background, he described that he did not necessarily consider himself an expert in literacy. As an alternative certification teacher through Teach for America (TFA) program, he recounted that he had been exposed to training in how to effectively teach language arts. However, there were so many other factors that took precedence over his development as a new teacher that he did not necessarily internalize the information. “When I think about teacher prep, I recall materials, lectures, sessions that I had that were on the right topics. Just being an alt cert candidate, I remember feeling like I was only partially internalizing maybe some of the more technical content because my mind, my time, my stress was kind of situated around understanding myself as a teacher. And so what's my teacher persona? How am I handling behaviors? Like how am I building relationships? Like I just need to get through this week! Or you know, report card conferences or whatever the case may be. And so it's not that the material wasn't presented to me. It's just that and perhaps in retrospect didn't happen at the right time or in the right format that made it stick in my mind.” Mr. Li expressed that he was not ready to learn some of the information presented in his alternative licensure program, especially foundational skills of teaching literacy. A major reason was that he was thrown quickly into the classroom and overwhelmed right away by the basic issues of teacher identity and classroom management. In addition, he

expressed that the materials may not have been presented in a format that aided actual internalization of the concepts.

As well as working as a TFA fourth-grade teacher for one year, he taught middle school literacy and science at a charter preK through eighth-grade school within the Chicago Public Schools, eventually becoming an assistant principal there for five years. Of his move to New York to become the founding principal of a middle school, he described that it was a “calling...to serve a community and a population that I felt had a story very similar to my own, being the son of immigrants.”

In regard to principal preparation as a literacy leader, Mr. Li stated, “From a principal lens, all of the principal preparation that I’ve had supports me in understanding what to look for and how to supervise or manage a program or a team of teachers doing this literacy work, but nothing at the principal level that I’ve ever taken has instructed me to become a stronger literacy teacher or to understand it from a teaching standpoint.” Mr. Li believed that he had been prepared to be a literacy leader, but he also made a distinction between the fact that he had not been trained to be an effective literacy teacher.

Because of this, Mr. Li asserted that he continues to focus on learning to teach literacy in an effort to continually improve his ability to lead in literacy. “And so my journey as a teacher and then a principal has, um, I’ve had to receive and I’ve had to commit to trying to learn the very technical aspects of literacy instruction. And quite frankly I feel like I’m learning more every day.” This statement highlights an important conception that Mr. Li held about literacy leadership. He appeared to view literacy

leadership on two levels: leading literacy as a principal through a schoolwide systems approach and leading literacy through an understanding of the experiences of teachers. Mr. Li believed that both leadership lenses were necessary in addressing schoolwide literacy goals and the realities of individual classrooms.

### **Role of the Principal**

Mr. Li described himself as the “lead learner” based on the belief that his work as a principal is to learn alongside the staff and community. “If I want my teachers to do this then I need to get into that work with them and roll my sleeves up, and I may not have all the answers but you learn when you’re in it doing it together.” A major issue Mr. Li voiced was the fact that being an instructional leader is just one aspect of the principal’s job. “For me, a struggle that I have as a leader around literacy instruction is, as a leader, literacy instruction, then instructional leadership, is only a part of what you spend your time focusing on and then you’ve got to turn your focus to family engagement and school culture and then the budget and district initiatives.” Mr. Li expressed that he cannot be at every unit planning meeting but that he believed it essential to attend professional development alongside teachers and to send the message that teachers have a “thought partner” in him.

He detailed important leadership responsibilities of the principal that fell under the overarching framework of aligning resources and time with the goal “to build our capacity toward strong literacy instruction.” Part of this work as the principal involved his leadership team in analyzing how to use the literacy standards in a meaningful way through building a shared understanding of their own underlying goals for literacy. Some

of the conversations they engaged in were about foundational literacy skills, such as what phonics should look like or the components of an effective guided reading block. Other conversations were more philosophical, involving discussions about the purpose of literacy, whether literacy is solely for college and career readiness or whether it is “about enriching lives and bringing happiness and an ability to learn more about the world around us as the reason.” These conversations extended to the issue of assessments, what the data measure, and whether the assessments align with their underlying goals for literacy. For instance, if an underlying goal of the school is to build a culture of literacy that impacts whether students are joyful when they read or want to read voluntarily, then a question the leadership team grappled with was whether there are assessments that actually measure such factors.

### **Leadership Structure**

Mr. Li believed a major responsibility as a principal was to build a strong leadership team in the areas of “curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school culture.” He believed this responsibility extended to “finding the right people to fill those roles, who have a passion and expertise in literacy and who can be ahead of us on the learning curve and then provide that professional development for us at the school.” He described the model at the school as distributed leadership, although he indicated that he did not generally “like to talk about hierarchies in education.”

A major shift the district had made that year was to move away from the more traditional principal/assistant principal model to a model with a principal and three deans. Prior to the implementation of this model, the leadership had been structured so that there

was a division between these roles, so that one employee was designated for curriculum and instruction and another for assessment. Mr. Li described that they found that “those people were kind of like Siamese twins. They would just go around the building together. And so we took those two positions and instead of creating them...vertically we kind of changed them horizontally to focus on different grade bands.” Two of these deans were focused on curriculum and instruction in strategic grade bands: preK through second grades and third through fifth grades.

Mr. Li elaborated on the structure of the leadership team and the way that it systematized various layers of collaborative effort and communication. “I will work most closely with...two deans of curriculum and instruction. Those two deans each have team leaders, who teach half-time and coach half-time, working on their teams. So each of those deans, for example, if we take the first- and second-grade team, we have a first- and second-grade teacher, she teaches intervention half-time and then coaches her peers and runs daily team meetings and collaborative planning time for those teachers. And so we have multiple levels of support. And when we're all sitting around at the table, there's eight of us- so the principal, the three deans and then four teacher leaders- the eight of us make up the instructional leadership team.” During his first year as acting principal, in an effort to build this strong leadership team in literacy and develop people's capacity to fulfill their roles, he and the instructional leadership (ILT) had spent a great deal of time grounding themselves in the standards and having discussions to come to common understandings of strong literacy instruction. The various members of the ILT kept in close communication with one another through regularly scheduled meetings. “So a

couple things will happen. I will have a weekly one-on-one meeting with the deans. They will have weekly one-on-ones with their team leads, and then I think a lot of it is, as I shared, doing the work together and diving into it.” This distributed leadership structure impacted literacy in that there were now team leads that worked directly under the supervision of instructional deans. These team leads taught half-time and then provided direct support to teachers through observing classroom practices, coaching teachers, running daily team meetings, and collaborative planning. In this way, the structure was ultimately focused on what was happening directly in teachers’ classrooms.

### **Curricular Resources**

Mr. Li used the example of the roll-out of a new curriculum to exemplify the realities that impact principals. He described that while teachers and school leaders might be engaged in a number of days of PD on the new curriculum, “principals are so busy that principals get a one-day session.” As a result, he saw himself as being consistently behind the staff in understanding the curriculum. He believed that he could eventually gain enough knowledge about the curriculum to be at par with the staff if the curriculum would remain the same for a long enough period of time. The reality was that a new curriculum or framework in literacy would inevitably be introduced, creating a situation where “you’re always trying to play catch up a little bit.”

For this reason, he voiced a desire to have a stronger grounding in the curriculum and “more of an ability to go into a classroom and say, ‘This is what solid instruction looks like.’” This was not only a desire he expressed for himself, but also for teachers. He

wanted teachers to be able to go beyond a particular curriculum or the “color-coded books” to be able to articulate what they believe about strong literacy instruction.

Mr. Li saw the rate of adoption of new curricula as a major issue not only in his own ability to understanding literacy programs in great depth but also the ability of teachers to effectively teach with the curriculum. He pointed directly to district as complicit in this issue. “With the right fortitude, the district could say, ‘We’re making a commitment to at least implementing this for four years or five years.’ And say, ‘Teachers let’s get really good at this’ as opposed to ‘Let’s vacate the building of these materials and bring in these.’ I feel like at the rate at which that happens often makes people feel like they’re never getting good or even great at the instruction.” Clearly, Mr. Li believed that there was an important time element that was missing in considerations about the adoption of new curricula. In reflecting on this, he described that principals might have a role in trying to effect change in the constant changes to literacy materials. “I think that there are things that principals can do to buy their teachers a little bit of time and space to say, ‘We’re learning. We’re not just running and catching up all the time.’” In this sense, Mr. Li saw the role of principal as that of bringing the experiences of educational staff back to the district in order to enable them to see that too many changes of literacy curricula within relatively short periods of time are not necessarily conducive to effective literacy instruction.

### **Building Instructional Capacity**

Mr. Li spoke at length about the need to build teacher instructional capacity through a combination of curricular resources and PD. Mr. Li described his own



experiences in his first year as a fourth-grade teacher and the lack of preparation he had felt in being able to negotiate the literacy program the schools required teachers to use. “Our school used Open Court, which was a scripted basal curricula. As a teacher, I was pretty aware of the fact that what I was using and how I was delivering it was really not the best way to teach. And yet as a first-year teacher, I didn't know any better. I didn't know how to do it better even if one could. I think even when you have a strong curricular resource or it's all there, unless you have some capacity with which to understand why this question is being asked or why this phonics lesson should follow, I just felt very unprepared to teach literacy at that time.” Mr. Li highlighted the difference between following a curricular script and making professional choices about how to use a literacy program based on sound pedagogical understandings.

He believed that schools systems exacerbate the issue of deskilling of teachers through curricular programs. “And I think we compound that struggle as teaching candidates leave teacher prep by taking a curriculum implementation approach once they leave the schools. So if I have a first-year teacher, I will automatically send her to how to teach Expeditionary Learning or how to teach something. And we do that because...the teacher that comes in November. We just give them the book because it's like, you're going to be onstage soon. You've got to just learn the lines like just, ‘Read it.’ And yet without teaching teachers why they're doing that or in what circumstance this practice this passage this type of instruction is helpful, um, we're not equipping them to really be decision makers in their own classroom.” For this reason, Mr. Li was willing to devote a great deal of teacher PD to bridging a solid understanding of the literacy curricula at the

school and providing teachers with the time to take ownership over it. In an effort to provide the support to teachers in gaining that depth of knowledge, the staff had spent a great deal of time in PD and unit planning over the summer and into the fall of his first year as principal. “In this first year of curriculum implementation, I would say out of 100% of the non-teaching hours that we've had for PD more than half has been dedicated to curriculum planning, unit planning, understanding what resources we have, how we're going to supplement them. We've probably paid teachers, I mean here and there, we've added additional curriculum planning days where they come in on the weekend, work through it as a team. It's just a lot to get through.” Based on his experiences during that first year, Mr. Li asserted his belief that, as a principal, it is necessary to be very involved in the work in order to support teachers to improve their practice. One example of this sort of direct involvement was exemplified in the fact that Mr. Li would take a guided reading group within one class for six weeks in order to have a common basis upon which he could work as a thought partner with the teacher.

Even given Mr. Li's desire to build a teaching staff with a solid understanding of effective literacy teaching, he described that teacher teams had made a deliberate decision to “stick pretty close to the curricula.” Other teams that had decided to “veer away from it a bit” were told that this would be fine with the qualifying question of, “If you're supplementing and if you're shifting the texts within a unit, how can we support you to make sure that it remains grounded in strong literacy instruction and the standards?” Hence, teachers who were inclined to use the curriculum more loosely, were held accountable through the team leadership to ensure that their instruction was tied directly

back to effective literacy practices and the goals and objectives of the state, district, and school.

Mr. Li did not see the movement toward a more strict enactment of the curriculum as being a contradiction to his desire to provide teachers with opportunities to enrich their pedagogical knowledge about literacy. Based on a spectrum of curricular implementation that ranged from teacher-made curriculum on one end and scripted curriculum on the other end, Mr. Li believed it was important to begin a turnaround school on the “tighter end” of that model. However, perhaps because of his own experiences with a scripted curriculum as first-year teacher, Mr. Li was clear that he did not want teachers to work at the tightest end of the pendulum and follow a script. He also explained his vision for the future, as the school stabilized and improved that “the pendulum will slowly swing towards the looser end.”

### **Literacy Environment**

Based on the strong and engaging literacy environment Mr. Li experienced as a child, he discussed the importance of the literacy environment. As he began his first year as acting principal at Carter Elementary School, he wanted to ensure that the activities of the school matched the tone he envisioned. “So I think a school-wide focus is going to be around, do we have a strong learning environment? And are the systems and routines and structures set in place for those components of literacy instruction?” This vision for literacy education included an academic focus on literacy, as well as a focus on how the vision could actually be enacted through systems and routines that supported the vision. In other words, Mr. Li was aware that a vision does not just happen solely by creating

and disseminating a vision statement. There must be organizational structures in place to make that vision a reality.

As an important part of the vision, Mr. Li reflected on the joy of literacy in its diverse expressions: “I think joy of reading looks different in different people. And it’s not just, ‘Oh, our interests are different so we read different kinds of books. Some people as adults, if we look at voracious readers, some people love to read to learn. So I have friends who are like, ‘I never read fiction. I just want to learn about carpentry, so I did this and there was this great book on organic farming and I dove into that.’ And other people are just like, I love narrative, like I love hearing rich stories about people’s lives. And so it looks different.” Mr. Li’s recognition of the multiplicity of purposes for literacy led him to believe that a “multi-faceted approach” was necessary for creating a literacy environment at Carter Elementary School “because it doesn’t look the same in every child.”

Mr. Li wanted to make the value of reading a norm at the school. Toward that end, he gave examples of that would demonstrated the normalizing of reading as a value at the school: teachers giving book recommendations to students; students giving book recommendations to each other; giving out stickers, and recognition of students “who are caught reading.” He also provided examples of school-wide functions that would serve to put reading in the forefront of the school and bring people together with literacy as a focal point: an optional book club with the principal; literacy nights with parents; and a book character parade at Halloween. And he believed that the school had the kind of teachers who would be enthusiastic about his ideas to move the value of literacy forward

and support them. “I also think that we've recruited the kind of folks, who if I say, ‘Hey, we need to this month *really* focus on recognizing voracious readers in our building,’ it's the kind of staff that isn't going to roll their eyes and say, ‘Here's another thing for me to do,’ but like, ‘You're right we need to do that.’” Mr. Li also believed that there was a balance between foundational literacy skills and literacy engagement. He described that teachers needed time to develop the skills of using engaging literature in connection with the technical aspects of teaching literacy. “I'd say there's another group of teachers who love the idea of putting high-quality literature in front of our children and just need more time to pull together a strong literacy block. Their heart is in the right place, but they just have got to have more experience saying, ‘We've got this high-quality literature. And how do we promote that technical piece of getting kids to decode the words on the page and really appreciate full comprehension of that literature?’ And we've got a couple teachers on the very experienced side for whom I think they've got both. You know, they've got this strong technical training as well as this appreciation for literature and how children learn to read. And coincidentally those experienced teachers are our deans and our teacher leaders. So I think we have the people in the right places. It's just you always feel pressed for time, you know.” In keeping with a theme that crossed over the interviews with Mr. Li, reading engagement was considered another area where teachers needed time to develop into experts who could seamlessly teach children how to decode and engage children in quality literature at the same time.

Mr. Li posed an essential question to determine whether a strong literacy environment was being supported in a community such as the one he served: “Do

children have access to texts in which they can hear narratives and see characters that are like them?” He believed that such culturally relevant reading material gave children an “entry point into reading.” He juxtaposed the need for culturally relevant books with his belief that children also need books that “engage them and bring worlds that are made up or real into their lives that they don't have access to in every day.” Mr. Li wanted to be intentional with financial resources in order to put the right books—books that would be most engaging—in the hands of children. It was very important to him to build a strong selection of literature.

Given that it was the beginning of Mr. Li's first year as acting principal, there were pieces to the literacy improvement effort at the school that he envisioned, but that had not yet been put in place. One of these pieces was the school library, which had been so outdated that they had dismantled it with the hope of eventually finding a new space where they could build an updated collection of books. He was candid in saying, “We don't have a strong system with circulating books and texts around the school, so the kids talk about the books they're reading.” Mr. Li saw the importance of book circulation and engendering an environment where students discuss books as a natural part of their day.

During the time of the interviews, less popular book titles had been either sent into classroom collections or given away to the school children with the hope that someone would find an interest in them. Mr. Li described the reestablishment of a new library as “my first priority” and said that it was “heavy on my mind, because growing up libraries were such a huge part of my life.” Like other participants in this study, Mr. Li

came into his position with a school library that was in disarray and no one to take on the important task of reviving this essential part of the school literacy program.

### **Key Findings**

Underlying my discussions with Mr. Li was a persistent theme of deep learning for both himself and the educational faculty at Carter Elementary School. Mr. Li was very aware that learning takes time and comes in stages. For this reason, Mr. Li had devoted significant time to PD as a means of supporting educational staff to process curricular materials in such a way that enabled them to take ownership over the lessons they would teach. Until that time when teachers could prove their expertise, they would need to more closely follow literacy programs. Mr. Li viewed experts at literacy teaching as those individuals who could both teach children to read and engage them in the sort of love of books he had developed as a child.

### **Mr. Correa**

#### **School Context**

Cottonwood Elementary School is located, as Mr. Correa described, “literally right across the street from the largest housing projects in the state.” Despite this fact, the neighborhood was gentrifying rapidly in a city in which the cost of living was dramatically increasing and the cost of housing within the urban core was rising. At the time of this study, Mr. Correa observed, “The demographics of my kids who go here are 95% of them are kids of color. 97% of them qualify for free and reduced lunch. About 40% or so of them are emerging bilingual kids who speak another language, mostly Spanish and then also Somali. That’s changing.” Families with greater socioeconomic

means, who had previously “choiced out,” were now opting to send their children to the neighborhood school.

Mr. Correa described the changes in the new preschool program that had just opened at the school. “Today I just opened up my three-year-old preschool program at the school this year. It's the most diverse cohort of kids in our entire school... There's just as many little white kids as there are black and brown kids. And that's not the case throughout the school, because we've got about 80% Latino students, 15% or so black, and across the school only 5% white. And so these three-year-olds are, I think, the most diverse.” Based on the increasing socioeconomic differences within the student composition, Mr. Correa noticed differences in literacy experiences with the children in the preschool program. “I think their experiences even at 3-, 4-, 5-years old, outside of school and before they came to school, are very different than some of the experiences that some of our kids otherwise have. And so I see those gaps at 3-years old, 4-years old, and 5-years old.” The mission of Cottonwood is “building opportunities,” which Mr. Correa explained, is “tied to the opportunity gap” and “trying to make sure that all of our kids truly have the skills and resources and access and experiences to do whatever they want with their lives, whether that is going to college or inventing a Pokémon GO app.” To that end, Cottonwood Elementary School had recently increased its ranking considerably within the state performance framework, being considered a high-growth school for academic achievement.

Cottonwood Elementary School received Innovation School status from the department of education in the state where the school is located. This designation is based



on an act that was passed at the state level and provides greater autonomy for schools to implement practices that are designed to more directly meet the specific needs of students on an individual basis. Mr. Correa cited the flexibility the school is afforded, because of Innovation School status, as an important factor in the ability of staff to continue to adapt to the changing needs of the students and community. “I think continuing that's one thing that we continuously do, whether it's managerial or instructional or technical or an adaptive challenge. I think that we constantly are trying to not ever get stuck in, ‘This is how we do things here.’” An important change the school was able to make due to Innovation School status was to adopt new literacy curricula to replace the outdated, district-mandated curricula.

### **Participant’s Background**

Mr. Correa came from a background similar to the majority of the student population at Cottonwood Elementary School. He was the first to graduate from college among 50-60 cousins that live in the same city where he grew up and where he now leads a school. Both his parents were immigrants from Mexico with an eighth grade education and, in the case of his father, another year of technical school. He recalled going to kindergarten and not knowing how to spell his name, copying it from the glue bottle on which his mother had written his full name but thinking he was actually spelling his nickname, overwhelmed by all of the letters. As a simultaneous bilingual student, he did not need to learn English, but he recalled wanting to attend English as a Second Language classes with his friends, whom he felt were lucky for being able to get out of their classroom.

Mr. Correa demonstrated great academic capability, but he was also affected by the trajectory of his friends, watching them drop out of school and being a part of a small group- two or three- who graduated and went on to college. He credited some of his academic success to his parents' insistence that he attend the migrant education program every summer when he was in elementary school. Avoiding the classes of teachers he did not like, he attended summer school throughout middle and high school to make up for truancy during the school year.

Mr. Correa shared a particular incident in ninth grade that served to exemplify his literacy experiences, as well as the intersection between his school, family, and community. Whereas there were not many books at his home, he had access to a set of James Patterson novels. A popular author among those in prison, where his uncle resided at the time, his grandmother had acquired a sizeable set of these mysteries, because his uncle would send them to her after he had finished reading them. Although he was only required to read five books in his ninth-grade literature class, Mr. Correa consumed one of these books every couple of days. However, due to his reluctance to write the book reports and have to prove that he was reading, he did not get credit for all of the reading he was actually doing. He recalled a particular incident during this time period: "I remember right around that time, one of my friends came over. I was on the couch reading, and he came into the living room and I remember him saying, 'You read?' And just kind of laughing like, 'Yeah I read.' It's just kind of an interesting experience. I guess in my community and my immediate circle of friends and influences and whatnot that it wasn't cool to do that."

Because of the trajectory of his life, which was different than many with whom he grew up, Mr. Correa expressed “guilt associated with being an outlier.” Having recently run into another high school friend who had just come out of jail, he explained that he wanted the students at Cottonwood Elementary School to experience a future in which it was more common for them to be in college than be in jail, that his high school friend’s experience would serve as an outlier rather than his own. Of this hope for the future of the children at Cottonwood, he concluded by saying, “Our data says differently.” Even though the school had recently received a high-growth designation for academic achievement, Mr. Correa clearly believed that the work was not completed.

### **Role of the Principal**

It was Mr. Correa’s fifth year at Cottonwood Elementary School, and his role had changed over the years. For the first three years, he was an assistant principal and director for the primary grades. During that time, specifically in regard to literacy, he observed, coached, and gave teachers feedback “that hopefully would leverage their strengths and also push them to next steps to increase the students’ skills and reading levels.” He did not consider himself to be an expert in literacy and mentioned a greater affinity to mathematics education. Regardless, Mr. Correa had a strong sense of the importance of literacy skills to children in their immediate context and in the future: “I think that without strong literacy skills that our kids don’t have those opportunities or won’t have them. I mean literacy is the gatekeeper, I think, between kids going to college or not. And I think I would identify more as a math person, personally, but some students will also probably not ever be able to access very complicated, multi-step math problems per

PARCC today, because of the reading and analysis in a math problem.” As a principal, Mr. Correa described his role as that of “accountability, setting goals, setting very high expectations, setting up the system so that all of our teachers could have access to a highly effective coach and then managing and leading and coaching my coaches.”

Standardized achievement tests, such as the Partnership for the Assessment of College and Career Readiness assessments (PARCC; PARCC Inc., 2015), formed an important reference point for developing literacy skills toward the goal of meeting standards in both reading and mathematics.

### **Leadership Structure**

The literacy leadership of Cottonwood Elementary School consisted of what Mr. Correa called the instructional leadership team (ILT): the principal, an assistant principal, an instructional dean, and three team leads. These individuals not only provide coaching to teachers at the school, but also to each other. Mr. Correa believed it was important for all school staff to receive feedback. “We just believe that everybody needs a coach, everybody needs to get better.”

Because Mr. Correa had worked in various leadership positions at Cottonwood, there were aspects of his previous positions he had originally retained. Now in his second year as the principal, he saw a need to release some of these responsibilities to members of the instructional team. For instance, he pointed out that he did much less direct coaching of teachers. Of this transition, Mr. Correa explained, “Today I think my role has changed in the sense that I’m not doing as much of the direct coaching with teachers,

because I've expanded my team and I've thought differently about leveraging experts in my building.”

He expressed a great deal of confidence in the three team leaders who had been chosen to take on a more direct support role with teachers. The students from the classrooms of the team leaders had shown growth that was well above average on the PARCC assessments (PARCC Inc., 2015) administered the previous year. This year, these team leaders taught in their own classrooms for half of the day and then provided direct support to other teachers for the other half of the day by observing, debriefing, co-planning, and providing feedback on lesson plans.

Another notable shift that had occurred within the leadership structure was focused on the ownership of data. Previously, Mr. Correa had taken a more direct role in knowing the individual data. More recently, he observed that the lead teachers were taking more ownership over the data. Hence, he was able to ask the lead teachers questions relating to their work with the other teachers, such as, “We've got this many Tier 3 students in first grade. How are we going to support this teacher to move them out of Tier 3 and into Tier 2?” Lead teachers were taking more direct responsibility for their work with teachers.

In addition to these employees, Cottonwood had a literacy coordinator who provided oversight to four reading tutors who conducted reading interventions for students who were below grade level in comprehension. Other students, who were struggling with letter-sound correspondences, were placed in a phonics-based program.

## **Data Use**

A strong theme in my first interview with Mr. Correa was the role of data as a tool to increase literacy achievement. He referred to the use of reading achievement data and the accountability tied to these data points as a “tough juggling act.” The leadership at the school were “constantly trying to find the balance and the highest lever data points that will inform instruction and also help students build the skills and have the experiences that they need to become great readers.”

For the past three years, the school had made a choice to partner with Success Systems. The company provided formative assessments aligned to the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and the PARCC assessments (PARCC Inc., 2015), which would be administered to students on computers three times during the school year. Based on the assessments, the company generated data that indicated the extent to which students had mastered particular standards. The benefits Mr. Correa named in using Success Systems were that it provided practice for students on a text similar to the PARCC assessment (PARCC Inc., 2015) and ideas for next steps for student instruction. For this year, however, Mr. Correa had decided to end the contract with Success Systems. “It didn't quite replicate the PARCC experience for kids, because they're so focused on students really just demonstrating what they know and then figuring out what they need next steps on or more support or instruction or experiences on that. They were unlimited time tests. And so when the kids took PARCC then they ran out of time...I was actually pretty worried about what our data would say, because I know a lot of our kids didn't finish.

And they were able to do the work, but they didn't have the time they were used to.”

Because the tests administered through Success Systems were unlimited in time, Mr. Correa believed that the Success Systems assessments caused a situation in which some students at Cottonwood, who were unused to the practice of timed tests, did not finish the PARCC test (PARCC Inc., 2015).

In addition, the Success Systems assessments were not well aligned to the scope and sequence of the reading curriculum used at the school. Hence, the students were being assessed on standards which teachers had not yet covered. Mr. Correa believe that this misalignment resulted in data that was less helpful in informing instruction for teachers. For these reasons, Mr. Correa had decided to partner with a different assessment company for the upcoming school year. He was hopeful that the new company could offer a framework that would prove more useful than Success Systems in maximizing both student reading achievement and performance on the PARCC tests (PARCC Inc., 2015).

A main reason Mr. Correa cited for the importance of the school partnership with an assessment company, which could support the school in preparing for standardized reading achievement tests, was that the formative assessments the district and school used were not, in his estimation, as rigorous as the assessments Success Systems and other similar companies provide. In the “tough juggling act” of assessments, Mr. Correa made the observation that there was a “big leap” between certain assessments the school uses “to progress monitor kids’ development as readers” and the PARCC tests (PARCC Inc., 2015) used for the purposes of accountability. As an example, he cited that the formative

assessments indicated 70% of the K-3 students at Cottonwood were at grade level in reading while the PARCC data (PARCC Inc., 2015) reported that only 8% of the third-through fifth-grade students met or exceeded expectations. In addition to the issue of rigor, Mr. Correa believed that the formative assessments measured very different skills than the company-produced assessments.

Another juggling act Mr. Correa foresaw was the change in the list of state approved literacy assessments. The state was requiring the use of a new computerized reading assessment system, the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016). Mr. Correa believed the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) reports on student reading performance would be helpful but, given that the implementation of the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) assessments were very new to the school, he was unsure how it would help to inform instruction.

Because of this change in assessments, some teachers at Cottonwood had asked Mr. Correa whether they still needed to conduct the formative assessments that had been used at the school in prior years. His response was that the teachers did not need to continue to conduct the traditional formative assessments from a compliance standpoint, but that they would need to continue to assess students formatively for the purposes of immediate feedback on student reading performance. Given that the computerized assessment system would not provide teachers with an opportunity to actually hear students read and conduct a more personalized analysis of each child's literacy needs, Mr. Correa and the leadership team asked that teachers to continue to conduct the formative assessments to ascertain next steps for instruction of students. In addition,



because the books throughout the school were still leveled based on the indicators used by the formative assessment, Mr. Correa believed it was important to continue with this assessment in order to effectively match book levels to students for small group instruction. Thus, even though Mr. Correa believed that the formative assessments were less rigorous than the assessments provided through Success Systems and were no longer even required by the state, he thought that they still played an important role in the daily decisions that teachers made to instruct students in small groups.

In conjunction with the sources of data that Mr. Correa saw as “tools,” weekly data team meetings were scheduled for literacy on Tuesdays in order to use these tools toward improved classroom instruction. The schedule had been rearranged over the course of the years in order to accommodate time for teachers to meet in data teams. Mr. Correa described that he had been refining these teams for two to three years and that in the beginning phases of data team meetings, he had played a much more active role in them. Teachers were not familiar with the process and did not need as much support from administration since the meetings had become established as a set routine. However, Mr. Correa and the leadership team did still play an active role by “sitting next to a group of teachers and sometimes posing questions or offering some feedback or wonderings, thoughts, or ideas. We'll kind of divide and conquer sometimes. So I'm going to go back and forth between fifth and fourth grade, and my instructional dean might do first, second, and third grade. And the AP might do kinder or early ed. or something like that.”

Small group instruction was the focal point for data team meetings. Rather than a focus on individual students or whole group instruction, teachers discussed a small group of students at approximately the same reading level, which formed the various guided reading groups in a given classroom. Mr. Correa described that the focus of the data team meetings: “I think in terms of literacy we view the highest lever in guided reading. You know so as a teacher for the most part you can expect an observation and feedback and co-planning for guided reading specifically. The literacy block has so many components to it, then just viewing that as a higher lever.” During data team meetings, teachers would bring formative assessments, such as running records. The teams used a shared drive to create a note catcher, which all team participants could access. The note catcher recorded a summary of the data, questions that had been asked and addressed, as well as next steps that team members would take with their guided reading group targeted during the meeting. Mr. Correa explained that continuity was created by remaining focused on one guided reading group for more than one meeting.

### **Technology Use**

Technology played a prominent role in Mr. Correa’s conceptions of the progress the school had made in student achievement growth in literacy. Google Drive was used to capture the group thought processes during grade level data team meetings, capturing wonderings, questions, and next steps. Curriculum was also shared through a Google Drive where lesson plans were uploaded. Specific to literacy, there was a folder teachers shared for guided reading with lessons that were leveled based on one of the formative reading assessments used at the school, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA).

“We have a shared Google drive as a school, and so everybody uploads lesson plans. For example, for guided reading we have a specific guided reading folder that we share at the school. So thinking about DRA as instructional levels, a teacher will create a guided reading lesson based on an instructional DRA 24 and upload it to this folder. So now the teacher next door can use that same lesson and vice versa. Of course they can tweak and change some things, but in terms of a resource in the building, we're building banks of lessons that teachers can have as a starting point.”

Technology was also used very intentionally to increase students' reading volume. Cottonwood Elementary was able to provide computer tablets for use with second- through fifth-grade students so that most students has access to technology throughout the day. In order to promote independent reading, Mr. Correa had purchased a three-year contract with a company that provides books online through an extensive digital library application. He described that, through the app, students take a reading assessment that determines their lexile level. Based on the assessment, the app provides books at an appropriate range of readability, as well as challenge books that fall slightly above the student's independent reading level. Mr. Correa observed that students who are not as engaged in enjoyment reading are commonly “zoned out.” He appreciated the capability of the app to monitor the amount of time a student spends on a page and prompts them to move on if they are taking an exorbitant amount of time on a page. The app also monitors whether a student is merely flipping pages rather than reading, and it flips the page back. While students read, the cloze technique presents students with a line of text in which words are strategically deleted; students must use the context to supply

the word. The data from this assessment is captured and can be used by teachers to inform them about the students' comprehension during independent reading.

A key reason for purchasing the digital library application was based on Mr. Correa's observation that students who are not at grade level in reading commonly feel self-conscious about reading books in front of their peers that are not at their grade level. Because the app is on a tablet, other students in the classroom are not able to see the book each student is reading. Hence, a struggling reader can read books at their level without their reading level being exposed to the rest of the class. With many student below grade level in reading at high-needs schools, Mr. Correa believed that the privacy afforded students during independent reading was a key to getting students to read at their grade level, thereby providing practice in reading that would result in increased reading practice and, therefore, increased reading achievement.

### **School-Family Literacy Connections**

Mr. Correa described a new strategy designed to increase connections between families and schools. The teachers in each grade level were given the goal of organizing two family nights, one for literacy and the other for mathematics. He described the fifth-grade Literacy Night as an example: "Our fifth graders in literacy have been reading *Esperanza Rising*, so they did a reader's theater. Each class did a reader's theater of *Esperanza Rising*, and there was also a potluck. And it was Mexican food themed, so families brought food, and the turnout was pretty great. And so the kids had their own little parts in this reader's theater. The teachers gave handouts to the parents to say, 'Here's what we're working on and here's some questions you could be asking your

kids when they're reading at home.' And then everybody stuck around for the food, of course, which was after. And it was great." This particular Literacy Night engaged families in a culturally relevant book, especially given the large population of Hispanic students. It also gave students practice in fluency through the format of reader's theater. In addition, it provided parents with ideas for home reading practices that they could use with their own children.

### **Key Findings**

As the principal at a school where he had held other leadership positions, Mr. Correa was working toward distancing himself to some extent from the very direct ownership of data and general oversight of teachers, especially in the area of early literacy where he had been the director of the primary grades. The instructional team at the school provided a structure for Mr. Correa to disseminate responsibility for literacy while continuing to be a key player in making crucial decisions about literacy instruction.

Mr. Correa sought to lead the ILT and teachers in using literacy assessment data with the goal of analyzing student performance. Various literacy assessments made up the body of evidence used at the school, ranging from publisher-created online reading assessments to standardized achievement tests to formative literacy assessments conducted by teachers. Mr. Correa worked with the ILT to find the most effective means of pinpointing student strengths and areas of need in literacy.

Teachers were engaged in data teams in order to analyze assessments for the purpose of improving literacy instruction. The unit of focus for data team meetings was

small group instruction. Mr. Correa viewed small groups, using the guided reading model, as the highest lever for increasing student literacy achievement.

Technology was used advantageously at Cottonwood Elementary School to increase students' reading volume. By purchasing a book app that could be used on tablets, Mr. Correa supplied students with a tool that would engage them in reading more. Family-school Literacy Nights also provided a platform for increasing the literacy engagement of both students and their families.

### **Ms. Martinelli**

#### **School Context**

Mountainridge Elementary School is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World school. As such, the focus is on the whole child. It is authorized to provide a primary grade curriculum specifically designed to prepare students as caring, lifelong learners who are able to participate in the world around them. With approximately 700 students, it is large for an elementary school. Mountainridge has a large population of emergent bilingual students, with 69% of its population of Hispanic or Latino origin. Therefore, it follows district guidelines for bilingual education, providing services in Spanish and ESL instruction for emergent bilingual students

It was Ms. Martinelli's fourth year at Mountainridge. As an incoming principal, she described her work as "starting from scratch" even though the school appeared to have a well-developed academic plan based on written reports. Ms. Martinelli gave an example of the writing curriculum that was supposedly being implemented at the school: "There was this idea that they were using Writing Alive for writing. I mean I got an

entire, it was 20 pages, document of all the essential agreements that had been signed and prepared the year before I came. And so I said to myself, wow they don't even need me. This is so, I mean this is awesome, and then I thought, okay so that's not actually happening, I found out. And so everybody just signed them and then did whatever they were doing, anyway.”

Similar to the issue with Writing Alive (Writing Alice Inc., 2013) Ms. Martinelli observed that teachers knew the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) in the sense that they could name the standards. However, there was no true alignment between the standards and the actual daily activities of the school. Rather than teaching based on the standards and literacy skills, teachers were focused on themes. There were scant curricular resources, so teachers would pull ideas from various sources, but the materials might not be at the appropriate reading level for the students and the teaching was unlikely to strategically target specific literacy skills. Instead of any systematic alignment within particular grades and across grade levels, Ms. Martinelli observed that “everybody was sort of just doing what they wanted.” Consequently, Mountainridge had been in slow decline based on the state and district performance frameworks, but the teachers did not know it. When Ms. Martinelli arrived at the school as the principal, the students who had been there the longest were not performing as well academically as students who had not. “And so when I came here...our continuously enrolled students are not our top performers...but again teachers didn't know the data.”

## **Participant's Background**

Ms. Martinelli was no stranger to educational reform efforts; her work at Mountainridge mirrored the school-wide reforms she had already accomplished as a teacher leader at a previous school. Although she had spent most of her time as a third- and fourth-grade mathematics teacher, Ms. Martinelli had volunteered for a district professional development opportunity that put her at the forefront of reform efforts focused on literacy at her previous school where she has spent 10 years. The district training was designed to introduce and institutionalize the RTI process at schools and, without at first realizing it, Ms. Martinelli had signed up to completely change the system through which literacy instruction was delivered. “And so we followed that plan over the course of the year and shared with teachers the information and implemented the differentiation block so that kids could get core instruction during the regular day. And then there would be this 40-minute block where kids who needed English language development would get their English language development, because we didn't want to give them an intervention if in fact it was a language issue. Kids who needed an intervention could get an intervention at the time, but they weren't missing reading instruction. They weren't missing writing instruction to go work with a specialist. They'd get both. And then the rest of the teachers would take all of the kids that didn't need any ELD block or intervention with their interventionist or special ed. kids would receive their literacy at that time. But the rest of the kids would get separated between all the other teachers and receive differentiated literacy instruction to push kids or to or the kids that were right at grade level that, just to really make them solid at the standards.”



Changing the school-wide system of literacy instruction required not only consideration of students who were receiving special education services but also emergent bilingual students. Ms. Martinelli was aware of the conflation of reading issues with second language acquisition and how students can be mistakenly placed in services for struggling readers when the need is really English language development.

Ms. Martinelli described this work as exciting. She emphasized that an important aspect of this excitement was working with other teachers to develop the plan for their school, describing the integral involvement in the reform efforts as having “skin in the game” because she was a teacher at the school. After this work had been accomplished and perhaps as an offshoot of the work, Ms. Martinelli decided to “try something different” and became a literacy intervention teacher, a position that was needed at the school. By the time she left, the school had “ended up at 85% of continuously enrolled students performing at or above grade level in literacy...And they have a very challenged population- lots of English language learners, high free and reduced lunch, lots of challenges.” She emphasized that these results can be attained if you have a “good system” in place.

### **Role of the Principal**

Ms. Martinelli’s vision for literacy was holistic. She saw the importance of making connections in literacy throughout the curriculum. “And so I guess my vision for literacy is it's part of everything. It has to be a well-rounded experience. If you just focus on the skills of reading then that child is probably not going to become a better reader. There's so much more to their day that will contribute to that. If I'm passionate in

science, and I'm learning science and social studies in different topics there, I'm actually doing my vocabulary. I'm talking about these things, and that makes me a better reader. So I just think that it has to be, kids have to have experiences that are very broad in order to actually make those improvements in that one area, because it's all connected.” Passion for literacy was incorporated into this vision through an acknowledgement that students will want to read, write, and talk about topics that are of interest to them.

According to Ms. Martinelli, putting a “good system” in place as a principal had been challenging in some respects at Mountainridge Elementary School. In describing the difference between her work as a teacher at her previous and as a principal at her current school, she stated about teacher leadership: “How exciting to be able to work with other teachers to develop that plan for our school. And it was just, because I had skin in the game; not that I don't have skin in the game as a principal. But when you're a teacher it's like, ‘I'm with you. I'm doing this. It's really, it's so I'm not doing it to you. I'm doing it with you.’” She asserted that the principal-teacher dynamic may have contributed to a difference in the way she was perceived by teachers.

In terms of her overall role as a principal, she stated her vision for the students at Mountainridge and her leadership toward that vision: “I'm trained to lead for what's possible for our kids, not where they are right now. We need to know where they are right now, but that's not what's possible. Because our kids are capable of as much or more than anyone else. It doesn't matter the color of your skin, the amount of money that your family makes. And so I think I lead with that that belief in kids and that belief in just that potential. I want that for my kids, so I want that for these kids.” Juxtaposing her vision

with the reality at Mountainridge, she pointed to data charts in her office and showed the steady academic decline the school had experienced in literacy prior to her arrival. She traced the very beginning of an increase in achievement scores within the last years, mentioning that it was also difficult to assess the actual progress made given that the state had been through a number of transitions in standardized tests and the data, therefore, did not match up along a continuum.

### **Data Reality Check**

A main strategy that Ms. Martinelli used to instigate change was to help school personnel to see the reality of the assessment data through a data walk. Ms. Martinelli had used this strategy as a teacher, laying out writing exemplars from a particular grade level for parents to read during parent-teacher conferences and then showing parents their own child's writing so that they could come to their own conclusions. "While the parents were waiting, I would have this is this exemplar response there, and they would have their little reading response journals there. And their parents would always walk in that first October conference and say, 'What do we need to do?' I'd have them hooked, but I didn't have to say anything. And so it's actually a very effective strategy. Data does work. Data, exemplars, it really does work. And everybody does want to do a great job. Parents want their kids to be successful, kids want to be successful. If you don't know where you are and where the mark is, you are never going to get there."

Ms. Martinelli led the teachers at Mountainridge through a similar process, showing the teachers the data from the previous year on her very first day as the

principal in August. She asserted that they were shocked by what they saw. “When you're asking about leadership for literacy, it's sort of using that data to get people asking questions, to get people to move in that direction. Because I truly believe that everybody wants kids to succeed and be successful, but if you don't know where they are, then you don't know that something needs to change. And so if you think that everything's okay, why would you change? And so just having, I think as a leader, coming in with teachers in that frame of ‘I believe that you want to be your best and that you want to do the best thing for kids, but if you don't know that you're not already doing that, how are you going to change?’” By the end of the meeting, the teachers understood that there was a need for change. She concluded the day by asking, “How are we going to do this together?”

Ms. Martinelli believed that a major factor that had played a role in teachers' unawareness of the data was the confusing system of school ratings, which differed between the state and district performance framework. The teachers had just seen the color of the school based on the state performance framework. Since the school was designated as “green” based on the state performance framework, she believed it was difficult to know that there was an issue with achievement. However, Ms. Martinelli believed that the state performance framework was less rigorous than the district one. In addition, she helped teachers to see past the color of the school to the more fine-grained information of the assessment data, which told a very different story, one that did not cast the achievement of the students at Mountainridge in a favorable light.

She also discussed confusing cut-off points between the new assessment system, Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016), and the cut-off points the state was using to determine RTI tiers of literacy intervention. These discrepancies left teachers believing that their students might be at a Tier 1 when they really might be in need of interventions at a Tier 2. In addition, the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) reports presented grade level reading information to parents that could potentially be misunderstood, creating miscommunications about the reality of their child's actual reading performance.

In discussing the use of data, Ms. Martinelli was comfortable with creating data reality checks but she was concerned that the instructional leadership team, especially senior team leads, were not. "My team is challenged right now in holding their peers accountable in these new leadership roles. And I think it's somehow uncomfortable for them to push on the data...I think that people think that they'll be able to do it, but once they step into that role then you really realize that challenge of the difficult conversation." Ms. Martinelli observed that some of the senior team leads were unable to move into a relationship where they were responsible for giving feedback based on data to other teachers. This directly and negatively impacted the important role these individuals played in working toward improved literacy instruction at the school.

### **Developing Teacher Leadership**

Likely because of Ms. Martinelli's own experiences as a teacher leader, her principalship at Mountainridge was characterized by supporting teachers to attend and bring back PD from the district to other teachers. Ms. Martinelli was aware of the fact that not all teachers can attend PD after their contracted hours because they have their

own family and personal obligations. Teachers who had more flexible time and were enthusiastic about attending district trainings were encouraged to do so and then disseminate their learning to others.

The participant described one situation that exemplified the development of teacher leaders. The district had raised expectations for the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) levels for kindergarten students; within two years the expectations would shift from a DRA 3 to a DRA 6 at the end of the year. Given the new standards and data indicating that the kindergarten students were not making expected gains in reading, district experts had been brought in to observe and provide feedback for instructional improvements. However, these experts could not find inadequacies within the classroom that were causing the stagnation.

Not satisfied with the situation, Ms. Martinelli and the teachers continued to look for keys to a breakthrough for increased early literacy growth. “So then we were like, ‘Okay so we're not getting there, but nobody can give us any feedback or support on anything that we should change,’ and so feeling kind of stressed about that, what could we do? But then there was this little training called Guided Reading Plus that was happening. And so one of my kindergarten teachers and the assistant principal said, ‘We'll take Guided Reading Plus, and we will bring it back and we will work with teachers,’ because our teachers didn't all have time to commit to this every once a week for four hours after work. You know, if you have kids at home you can't do it. They just couldn't do it. And so we did that and so we implemented it in teams that they would start with a strategy or a little lesson every week.”

The assistant principal and kindergarten teacher, who had attended the PD, then provided coaching for the other kindergarten teachers. In addition, the assistant principal taught a group of kindergarten students for 30 minutes every day during the literacy block. Ms. Martinelli concluded the description of one of their efforts to improve early literacy instruction by saying, “And I would say that's leading by example, leading by doing, so that I'm with you in this struggle of raising this for our students.” Through the use of teacher leaders and with the support of the assistant principal, Ms. Martinelli was able to increase the knowledge base of teachers about guided reading and provide coaching to teachers in order to ensure that the district PD was being incorporated into the daily instructional practices of the teachers.

### **Curricular Resources**

Ms. Martinelli believed that another important move to ensure high quality Tier 1 instruction and consistency of instructional delivery was the purchase of literacy materials. She stated that, upon her arrival at the school “there was really no consistent resource being used.” During her tenure, the school staff had gone through the process of adopting a literacy curriculum based on a list of resources approved by the district. As an IB World school, one consideration in making curricular choices was the potential for alignment with the IB program of study. Given the large numbers of emergent bilingual students (English/Spanish) and classes taught in Spanish, a second major consideration was the extent that the companies provided comparable curriculum in Spanish. A third consideration was whether the companies provided English Language Development

(ELD) curricular materials. Ms. Martinelli worked with staff to choose curricula that most closely fulfilled the multiple needs of the school. Of the new literacy programs, Ms. Martinelli stated, “I feel there's also a burden that's been lifted. Because as a teacher, if you're out there trying to put things together, searching Pinterest and other places for lesson ideas, you know deep down that you are creating some intentional, you're not 100% certain that this is what really is quality, good anything I should be doing.”

An important distinction Ms. Martinelli made was between teacher enactments of the curriculum with fidelity versus integrity. She was a proponent of expecting teachers to use the curriculum with integrity, but not necessarily with fidelity. In voicing the message she sent to teachers, she said, “So what we're looking for is core components in your literacy block. And so we're not calling it fidelity to the curriculum. We're calling it integrity to the curriculum. Somebody told me that one. I really actually like it. Because with fidelity, I could actually have fidelity to a curriculum and kids could learn nothing, but I faithfully did everything I needed to do... We really need to be thoughtful about how we're planning that and really wanting to use our data and the assessment pieces along the way to check and do and re-teach... what are our students struggling with and what do we need to do differently?” Ms. Martinelli emphasized that she did not want teachers to follow the curriculum without using their professional judgment and the available data to make adjustment to the daily procedures recommended through the adopted literacy programs.



## **Raising Expectations for Students**

Another aspect of delivering quality Tier 1 instruction to the entire student body at Mountainridge entailed raising the expectations among teacher of what students could actually accomplish in literacy. Ms. Martinelli discussed a number of instances, which exemplified the need for raised student expectations. She described these events as potentially her “best leadership move.”

At the beginning of the year, the first-grade teachers had assessed their students with the DRA. The DRA levels would provide baseline data, which was another system Ms. Martinelli had implemented. However, the results indicated students had regressed in their literacy skills. Because the students had tested at lower levels than in the spring of their kindergarten year, the teachers planned to teach the students at the level of their fall first-grade DRA assessments. Ms. Martinelli insisted that the teachers begin instruction at the level of their spring kindergarten assessments, which were higher. “These conversations were taking place, and they wanted to start instruction this year based on what they assessed in the fall. And I said, ‘We will not do that.’ I said, ‘You will start your guided reading groups this year at their previous level. And they were like, ‘But but ...’ And what I actually ended up saying to them was, ‘What does it tell the child who knows that they are a reader? They left kindergarten as a reader, and you're going to give them a 3 and tell them that that's who they are as a reader.’ And I said, ‘They haven't been reading over the summer. I read to my kids every summer. Many parents do, but I didn't ask them to read. I never even thought to tell them to read to me.’ I said, ‘And so we're going to take away all of their learning? It might take them a minute or two to get

up to speed, but start them where they left off.’ And I could just feel as though it was a very stressful moment, but they did it. And guess what? That’s who they are as readers.”

An important rationale for basing instruction on the higher kindergarten levels from the previous spring was that the many of the students had likely not practiced reading over the summer and were also overwhelmed by all of the new stimuli that comes with starting a new grade in a new classroom. She told the teachers, “You’re assessing them on skills they have not practiced. They don’t know you yet. I mean, even if they’ve been in your room for a couple of weeks, they’re just trying to figure out how to get along. How do I sharpen my pencil here? How do I go to the bathroom? And I’m stumbling over these words, and I want my teacher to like me. All of the things that are wrapped up that we then assign a level to.” She estimated that the first-grade students could have lost an entire year of growth if teachers had taught to the levels of the DRA assessment results of the fall rather than those of the prior spring.

Beyond reading performance, writing was a literacy skill for which Ms. Martinelli set a tone of raising student expectations. In a similar incident as the one that had occurred around first-grade reading expectations, Ms. Martinelli was faced with a group of third-grade teachers who were convinced that the students could not write based on their analysis of a student writing sample. She began a conversation with these teachers to further their thinking: “And I said, ‘But this is what they wrote in the spring.’ I said, ‘What kind of reading instruction have you done so far in the last two weeks or writing instruction?’ ‘I haven’t.’ ‘Did you show them an exemplar of what that would look like before you gave them that prompt of what writing would look like for a third grader? So

you gave them that prompt? Did they answer that question in these couple of sentences? Did they have a checklist to remind them of what they need to go back and check their writing for? What do you think might have happened if we would have done that? It might have been better.”

In addition to the reduced expectations the third-grade teachers voiced about their students, Ms. Martinelli was not satisfied with the writing expectations as measured through the district and state. In order to both challenge teachers to consider the students as writers and to set the bar high with explicit expectations for writing, Ms. Martinelli went on a hunt for writing exemplars from a program she had used many years before, finally obtaining them from a colleague with whom she had worked at a previous school. She had remembered these exemplars as setting the bar high for writing expectations, and she started to work with teachers at each grade level to show teachers what she expected of students. “So then we gathered them all up, and I actually started a data team with them. I said, ‘Here are some exemplars...It's vertically aligned, and there are the exemplars. And they have the two different score points.’ So I did it for every single grade level team, and that was our very first calibration session around writing. And I just said, I started out by having them read them and, ‘What do you think?’ And they were just like, ‘Oh my gosh’...And we knew that our students could do this, our students could be doing this today. And the teachers were like, ‘Yes, they would.’” Ms. Martinelli had used a strategy that had been beneficial throughout her career as an educational professional. By showing data and providing wait time for her audience to conduct an analysis and draw their own conclusions, she had been able to guide teachers to question

their assumptions about students and increase their sense of possibility about what students could accomplish in writing at Mountainridge.

Mountainridge Elementary School is designated as an IB World school, a program that puts the whole child at the center of the curriculum. Ms. Martinelli mirrored this philosophy. She spoke on a number of occasions about students' self-efficacy in the area of literacy. She not only discussed the actual performance of students, but how they could perceive themselves. In the case of the teachers who planned to teach to the comparatively lower levels of their first-grade students' reading assessment data, Ms. Martinelli speculated on the potentially detrimental psychological consequences that teachers could unwittingly have on students' self-efficacy. "The emotional damage that I've actually just done to that child- unintentional- 100% unintentional. Some kids don't recover from that, because that's devastating. Because that's who my teacher thinks I am. That's what they think I can do. And in a six-year-old brain, you're not thinking, but I know I'm better. That's just, I feel that we've done a tremendous disservice for so many years." During the conversations with teachers about writing expectations and student achievement, Ms. Martinelli emphasized that teachers should view the students as already being writers. She told teachers, "So, they *are* writers. Let's remember that they *are* writers."

### **Key Findings**

Ms. Martinelli placed a consistent focus on data as a means to create and sustain a vision for literacy learning at Mountainridge Elementary School. However, a main issue Ms. Martinelli expressed was the misleading nature of the data, if one did not know how

to look deeply into what the data was actually measuring, how that data was being measured, and the ways the measures were communicated. Through an analysis of data, she led teachers toward their own conclusions about the progress students were making in literacy. Through the use of exemplars, she also led teachers to a vision of the possibilities for the children at the school in terms of what they could actually accomplish with strong literacy instruction.

### **Mr. Schmidt**

#### **School Context**

As the second lowest performing school in the city, Espinar Elementary School was in the beginning of its first year as a turnaround school when I first interviewed Mr. Schmidt. During the previous year, a restaffing process had occurred during which all teachers had to reapply for their positions. When it was announced that the school was being designated with turnaround status, one-third of the teachers quit. Mr. Schmidt did not rehire another one-third of the teaching staff who had been there. Hence, approximately two-thirds of the teachers were new to the school. Of the beginning phases of the turnaround process, Mr. Schmidt described, “We redesigned the school and hit the reset button across the board.” According to Mr. Schmidt, Espinar Elementary School had come out of the first stages of turnaround with a new direction. “But last year our challenge was to get through the planning, to get through the restaffing process, to build a new team. It was very challenging. It was very traumatic for many people. It was tough. This year, it's great because we've removed these larger question marks that have been swirling around the school just in terms of what direction is the school going, who's

going to be here, etcetera. These are very big questions that had a big impact on everyone. Those are gone. We have our plan. The path is kind of illuminated before us, but there's a lot of work to do.”

In addition to Spanish speaking students, which made up a majority of the emergent bilingual learners, the student population included speakers of Arabic, Somali, and a number of other languages. During the initial phases of the turnaround process, Espinar Elementary School transitioned from a dual language model of bilingual education to the English Language Acquisition program, created by the district for the purposes of meeting the requirements of a federally mandated consent decree. Through the previous dual language structure, the school had attempted to provide students with Spanish-English immersion. The district had decided that Espinar Elementary School was not performing well enough academically to continue this more intensive form of bilingual education. The change to the English Language Acquisition program meant that there was more emphasis on transitioning students into English, but there would still be a Spanish component for those students who spoke Spanish as their first language.

It appeared that the district had made the decision to move away from the dual language program, because the school could not accommodate the sophistication of such a model, which takes considerable planning, structure, and human resources in two languages. Even though the English Language Acquisition program was put in place to ease the pressure on the school, Mr. Schmidt intimated that there were still many requirements to follow. “We're under a federal consent decree to do things a certain way. And I don't think anyone here is philosophically opposed to the intent of the consent

decree, but how that flushes out on the ground is there's just a lot of parameters that we're working with and a lot of things that are coming at us from different angles and different departments in central office. And we're just trying to support our teachers in making sense of it all and following the law and the guidelines, but ultimately just doing what's best for the kids that are in front of them.” Mr. Schmidt sought to maintain students as the focal point in a situation that could become too focused on district requisites to the detriment of meaningful learning.

### **Participant’s Background**

Based on the district turnaround process, the previous year would have been a year of planning for Mr. Schmidt, during which he would have been afforded the time to transition into the role. However, Mr. Schmidt actually worked at the school as the acting principal that year. My interviews took place during Mr. Schmidt’s second year as the principal, but the first year that the official time-clock for the turnaround process began.

Mr. Schmidt had been a student within the urban district where he worked as a principal. As a graduate of the district, he said, “I went to some pretty poor schools and so I didn't have a great experience, which I have no doubt motivated me in different ways and has an impact on me today.” Mr. Schmidt also “had a great run as a teacher,” working for 10 years primarily in fifth grade within this same district. At the school where he taught, there were 43 different languages. He described, “It was an incredible place. We were very proud of the fact that we were the one school that had a high percentage of free and reduced lunch. It was 90%. We had a percent of English language learners around 90, and we were a distinguished school for many, many years, and we

were not a charter school.” Specific to language arts, he recalled that he taught from the “old literacy workshops” distributed through the district. It was based on the whole language approach to teaching reading and writing as structured by Lucy Calkins (1994).

### **Role of the Principal**

Mr. Schmidt’s perceptions of his role as a literacy leader was integrally bound up in the immediate needs of the school when he first arrived. Because the community was “very disenfranchised and feeling very negative about the direction of the school and the previous leadership,” repairing the culture of the school and its relationship to the community became a priority. An example of a direct literacy connection between the school and community occurred as I was waiting for my first interview with Mr. Schmidt. An employee came into his office and had a brief discussion with him about books for kids. Mr. Schmidt later explained to me that this was the community engagement specialist, who was working with an outside organization to get book donations for students to read during winter break. When the community engagement specialist had asked him whether there were parameters on the types of books to be purchased as donations by the outside organization, Mr. Schmidt had replied that he wanted any books that would “get them reading over the break.”

In regard to literacy, Mr. Schmidt identified his top leadership focus as identifying best practices. He emphasized that the implementation of the most effective literacy practices was crucial in a school where there was an urgency to raise student achievement for those students who had not been well-served in the past. “An extra nuance there is being a turnaround school, and there are pervasive gaps and kids who are significantly



below grade level. You know, it's not good enough. A year's growth isn't good enough if we're going to close these gaps. So there was a lot of just challenging conversations around that and a lot of just work around building a team that embraces that. Because we can't just keep not only doing what we're doing, but if our kids are two years below grade level, just expecting them to make a year's growth because then they're never going to catch up.”

Providing students with opportunities for condensed learning through highly effective literacy strategies formed a part of the vision for Mr. Schmidt’s leadership. He saw it as a crucial way “to move the needle instructionally.” In order to catalyze necessary changes to instruction, Mr. Schmidt was willing to have challenging discussions with school personnel about the current achievements levels of students and the expectations for academic growth.

### **Culture of High Expectations**

Because the reputation of Espinar Elementary School had suffered in the recent past, Mr. Schmidt was determined to repair the negative perceptions associated with school. He described this as the “initial focus” and added that culture was very important to him. As a turnaround school, the fact that Espinar had been designated with that status would both engender a sense of its past failures as well as hope for its future success. However, Espinar Elementary had not only been placed under turnaround status, but it was also well-known as the second lowest performing school in the district. Mr. Schmidt described himself as “coming into a situation where the pervasive need was cultural and repairing the culture and building a strong foundation with respect to culture and then

also reconnecting with the community.” He spoke of a general need to create “a culture of high expectations for our kids and what they're capable of and what also we should expect as a reasonable goal for growth by the end of the year.”

Literacy was included in the cultural shift Mr. Schmidt envisioned. For instance, Mr. Schmidt described “tough conversations” he had led with early children education teachers about “what’s developmentally appropriate” with preschool children. These discussions led to work related to both culture and “philosophy in terms of how we need to support our kids.” Mr. Schmidt believed that more literacy related skills, such as oral language development, phonemic awareness, and phonics, need to be included in the ECE curriculum. A significant reason for Mr. Schmidt’s stance was the gap he saw as children entered Espinar. “The gap has emerged before they even get here. I know they're only four, but that's our reality.”

Mr. Schmidt focused on the level of oral language development he observed in preschool children at Espinar as directly impacting potential literacy performance in later years. “But at the end of the day, our students are an impacted population and they're coming from homes where they don't have the same amount of exposure to language, etc., through no fault of their own. And so, unfortunately and painfully so, they're walking into ECE with gaps, and so we just have to have a different approach if we want to support them in closing those gaps and getting them where they need to be.”

He believed these gaps were due to less spoken language and sophisticated vocabulary usage, as well as fewer read aloud opportunities, between adults and children.

He emphasized that he did not believe that parents did not value literacy, but rather that many parents were trying to survive financially. “And the reason is not that that's not valued but, unfortunately the reality with many of our students is they're coming from homes where there's not a lot of vocabulary, where they're not being read to. You know, parents are working two jobs, and they're busy.” If preschool students at Espinar were not coming in with the skills needed for later success in literacy, Mr. Schmidt reasoned that ECE teachers should provide experiences to increase kindergarten readiness skills in literacy. In addition to oral language development, he listed an end-of-year goal that ECE students should be able to name all of the letters and accompanying sounds.

Perhaps, given the resistance he was experiencing from ECE teachers, he capitulated to some extent by telling the ECE teachers that focusing, at the very least, on oral language development and vocabulary through connections to the unit theme would be a step in the right direction. He used an example of a current unit to describe the message he gave to ECE teachers. “Right now they're doing buildings and construction as their theme. So when you're in the stations that are talking about construction, what questions you want to ask that reaffirm the vocabulary and what and how can you ensure that you're getting complete sentence answers out of your kids or prompting them to do so just to start to walk down that path, which is huge.” Changing expectations from the district about what was expected in kindergarten also entered into Mr. Schmidt's beliefs about the direction of the ECE program. As higher expectations were raised across the early elementary grades, he believed that higher expectations for ECE were necessary and reasonable.

## **Data Use**

In order to raise expectations, an important school-wide system that Mr. Schmidt began to put in place during his first year at Espinar was the use of data as a means of understanding the achievement levels of students. An important function of analyzing data was to establish a feedback loop so that teachers could begin to reflect on their instruction based on the data in an effort to build in a system of progress monitoring that was integrated within the school culture. “We’re really building capacity in teachers to just have these thought processes on their own as they just look at their data and work with their kids, especially in small reading groups, but then also just have a finger on the pulse of where their kids are with respect to their literacy skills and have a deeper understanding of that.” The school had a designated data room with posters displayed on the walls. These served as reminders of the achievement levels of the students at Espinar. Mr. Schmidt believed that an important step in making the necessary changes was for teachers to see that changes were necessary. Data presented a reality that was difficult to dispute.

Mr. Schmidt explained the system of data analysis. For literacy, school personnel had set up a body of evidence (BOE) to be used in data analyses: a running, record, and Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) score, and a writing sample. Throughout the month, there were different types of analyses based on different types of data. Mr. Schmidt described the process: “So we have these different lanes. One is to look at the whole class. One is to look at a group of kids who aren’t necessarily meeting expectations

with respect to a specific skill or standard and come up with a reteach and go from there. And the other is to look at kids who are significantly below grade level.”

For the third type of meeting, a real consideration was which students who were significantly below grade level they would focus on, given the generally low achievement of the school. Mr. Schmidt explained that teachers were allowed to bring concerns about only three students to that meeting, students “you just can't figure out what's going on and you've tried different things,” because that meeting was not “time to talk about the fact that your whole class is below grade level.” These meetings were aligned to the RTI process in that these students could be targeted for further interventions, and there were specialized staff included in these meetings.

### **Curricular Resources**

One of the first responsibilities Mr. Schmidt faced in his new role as a literacy leader was to choose literacy curricula for Espinar. His analysis of the situation at the school led him to believe that there was a widespread need for curricular resources to teach language arts. He had been told by teachers that, in the past, they had just been given the literacy standards and told to teach them. As a former teacher, he believed that this strategy was not the most advantageous for either the teachers or the students. In his view, it added unnecessary stress to the job and created an education disadvantage in the classroom in terms of effective literacy strategies.

Mr. Schmidt expressed that he had felt overwhelmed by making important curricular decisions, given the many factors to consider. In addition, because he did not have the extra year to transition into the role of principal that other principals in

turnaround had been afforded, called Year 0, he needed to make the decision while balancing all of the other demands of his position. “The folks that had the Year 0 planning year had a little bit more time and space to do their homework.”

One main consideration in deciding on the most effective literacy resources for the school was accommodating the needs of emergent bilingual students at the school. “I ended up making choices based on a couple of factors. Number one, I did do my homework. I'm not going to say I chose blindly. Obviously standing out is that you want something that's research-based. But beyond that I wanted something that had good supports for English Language Learners, because we do have something beyond just Spanish. You know, again we have our Somali speakers, Arabic speakers, so the English component had to have good ELL supports. It also had to be strong in both languages to support our Spanish-speaking students. Beyond that I wanted things that lended themselves to being trans-disciplinary and being able to incorporate science and social studies, because I think that that's an important place for us to start to go. That's a journey for us.”

Given the high numbers of Spanish-speaking students, as well as students who spoke languages other than Spanish, Mr. Schmidt focused on finding curricula that had well-established components to meet the needs of the diverse population of emergent bilingual students. He, therefore, needed to consider whether the various choices had a Spanish curriculum that was comparable in quality. In addition, he needed to consider whether there was a high-quality English language development component. A final consideration included the degree to which literacy programs included informational

topics so that other subject areas could be incorporated into the language arts experiences of students.

Based on his experience as a teacher, Mr. Schmidt voiced concern over the fact that teachers had been expected to create all of their own literacy lessons. “Where the school was coming from was a place where they just said, ‘We’re not going to use anything, just here are the standards and figure it out.’ And I think philosophically and as a former teacher, I think that’s a little bit crazy.” He discussed the fact that he wanted to find a literacy program “that wasn’t too loose and that was relatively scripted.” However, he also emphasized that he did not expect “teachers to just be robotic and read from page to page.” Of his vision for the way a literacy program would ideally be used, he stated, “I mean they’re professionals, and we’re building capacity in them to make modifications.” Mr. Schmidt’s goal was to develop teachers who would have the expertise to make adjustments to the literacy curriculum based on sound professional judgment.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development was an important consideration in the choice of literacy curricula. Mr. Schmidt weighed the extent to which the district could support teachers in understanding and using the literacy programs. Of this consideration, Mr. Schmidt stated, “So we picked things that teachers could go to centrally-provided professional development where the district has folks that can come out and help teachers co-plan a unit. Because I wasn’t, I was just leery of going in a significantly different direction, and then it’s all on us to figure this thing out.”

The district would provide all-encompassing training and continuous PD for the literacy curriculum that was adopted by a large number of schools. Mr. Schmidt could tap into this support for his teachers. He recognized that teachers would need ongoing assistance in unpacking the curriculum and then learning how to best teach with it in their classrooms. He did not expect teachers to just figure out how to teach literacy from the curriculum. Given all of the issues this turnaround school faced, Mr. Schmidt chose a program that would be given the maximum support from district literacy experts.

In addition to the PD provided for purchased curricula, Mr. Schmidt also believed it was important for the teaching staff to become trained in the small group instructional model the district was using, Guided Reading Plus (Dorn & Soffos, 2010). Teachers were involved in becoming educated about guided reading through one of two channels- a college course or district-led PD. “All of our teachers are in coursework called Guided Reading Plus (Dorn & Soffos, 2010). We're very excited that our teachers are in the official course for college credit or they're in a PDU that's being run by our network literacy support partner.”

Mr. Schmidt believed it was very important to be trained in guided reading, because of the complexities of this instructional model. “We're making it just a big push for our classroom teachers to have a very thorough and in-depth understanding of guided reading best practice. And it's impressive. I mean when I look at it compared to what I used to do when I was teaching small group, it's just like night and day. I get excited thinking about it, but it's also a lot of planning and a lot of time. I mean each student has individual goals. You're targeting the vocabulary you're going to approach in the



book. You have to plan for questions, plan for stopping points for discussion. You have predetermined evidence that you're going to want the students to look for. There's also a writing component that you're planning for on occasion and so it's a big lift, because we're asking teachers to just plan for their literacy lessons in general, which is important. But within that, during our small group time, we're asking them to have very tight and detailed lessons for each one of their groups.” Given the many components to guided reading, in addition to the fact that teachers would need to plan for each differentiated group within their classroom, Mr. Schmidt expected that teachers were making use of one of the ongoing PD opportunities for this model.

### **Small Group Focus**

The small group work that occurred with students during guided reading was a focal point for the literacy program at Espinar Elementary School. Mr. Schmidt expressed his belief that this mirrored the focus of the district. “I think that's where the main focus is right now, because there's just this belief that with respect to, not so much writing, but just explicit reading skills are targeted, and you're going to see the most growth is when you're differentiated, you're in a small group. If you're well planned out, you're going to be very targeted in terms of what you're working on with each kid and be mindful of each kid's goal. And that's where the growth is going to take place, not to be dismissive of whole group instruction or whole group lessons, but there is a strong commitment to a focus on very tight and explicit planning for guided reading.” Based on Mr. Schmidt's philosophy and the district focus, with the exception of one first-grade class with greater needs instructionally, one-on-one tutoring was not taking place. Whole

group teaching occurred at the school during language arts time, but the sentiment was that the greatest impact would be made through differentiated instruction with students who were at the same approximate reading level. Mr. Schmidt believed that small group instruction was where “you’re going to see the most movement.”

Beyond the classroom teacher, small group instruction was also the focus for the various personnel who provided extra instructional support at Espinar. These support personnel formed an instructional services team, many of whom worked specifically in literacy. The instructional services team was a mix of district employees, such as paraprofessionals, as well as volunteers. In addition to the classroom teacher, all of these instructional support personnel were pulling small groups of students at various times of the day during the literacy block as well as during the extended day, called the Power Hour, which served as an extra hour of instructional time after school.

Through grant monies, Mr. Schmidt had created a new position, the intervention-extension coordinator. This individual directed all of the various organizations working with small groups of students. The intervention-extension coordinator used literacy data in order to ensure that students were being given small group instruction based on their needs. She also provided PD to the various adults who worked with children in literacy.

### **Key Findings**

Overarching all of Mr. Schmidt’s efforts was a desire to raise the culture of expectations for teachers and students so that increased achievement could become a reality at this underperforming school. Discussions with Mr. Schmidt revolved around an ever-present sense that “there’s no time to waste.” Within the classroom, Mr. Schmidt

supported teachers and influenced instructional practices through the purchase of robust literacy curricula that were connected with PD. He wanted to reduce the workload of teachers on unnecessary tasks so that they could concentrate on strengthening their teaching and maximizing their instructional effectiveness.

Mr. Schmidt envisioned an increase in student literacy achievement through a system of small group instruction where students with the most need were exposed to the greatest number of small group interventions. He worked to maximize the number of student interventions in an effort to increase the literacy skills of the students at Espinar Elementary School, but he also recognized that this time needed to be high impact. Through the intervention-extension coordinator, he sought to create a system through which the many potentially disconnected support personnel could be organized and supported by a professional who had a strong background in literacy.

Data use was another means through which Mr. Schmidt sought to influence instructional practices. Data team meetings became an essential time for teachers to discuss their students' current literacy performance. Analysis of data was an important process through which Mr. Schmidt tried to keep the focus on improving literacy instruction by meeting the needs of students in small group instruction.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter investigated the perceptions of six principals as they discussed their role as literacy leaders and resultant actions within their particular context. In regard to the two research questions under study, each participant's account was formed through the intersection of their current school context, unique personal and professional

experiences, and views about their role as literacy leaders. Participants' understanding of literacy processes impacted their perceptions and actions. The district influenced the direction of each school as principals took district messages and policies back to their own context. In addition, participant accounts were embedded within the particular time that this study took place. Some principals had been at their schools for longer than others. This impacted the current actions of each participant and the particular issues they focused on. In Chapter 5, I look across participant accounts to analyze themes that emerged through individual interviews.

## **Chapter 5: Cross-Case Discussion**

This research investigated six principals' conceptions of their role as literacy leaders and the ways these perceptions were enacted in the daily work of leading K-5 high-need schools. In Chapter 4, a picture emerged of how each principal developed their own leadership style in literacy, shaped by personal and professional experiences. The unique aspects of individual leadership in literacy were highlighted through a description of each participant's story. From the descriptions of each case study, commonalities and differences began to surface as themes came to the forefront that underscored the complex and multi-faceted work of principals who seek to effect change in literacy achievement within high-need K-5 schools. Through a cross-case analysis of the data, it is these themes that I describe in this chapter.

### **School Context**

After serving in leadership roles in a number of high-need schools within urban settings, Mr. Li succinctly spoke of his own experience and that of other principals as they entered high-need schools: "Whenever you go into a turnaround, one of the descriptors is just it was chaotic." This chaotic environment served to create a malaise of ineffective literacy instruction and resultant low student achievement in the language arts. Upon their arrival, principals were faced in high-need schools with a situation where there was proportionately a much larger population of students in need of Tier 2 and Tier

3 literacy interventions than would be considered reasonable. Based on the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, Table 2 serves to represent the relative distribution of literacy instructional needs of 100 students in high-need schools at the time the participants in this study were hired into their positions as principals. Tier 1 instruction is core literacy instruction that should be effective for meeting a majority of student literacy needs. Tier 2 is increasingly intensive literacy intervention provided when students are not making adequate progress through Tier 1 instruction. Tier 3 is intensive intervention that targets each student’s literacy skill deficits and is usually meant to be reserved for students who need special educational services.

*Table 2. Participant Arrival: Distribution of Literacy Achievement at High-Need School*

Tier 1
XXXXX
Tier 2
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Tier 3
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

X= literacy instructional needs of one student

Ms. Sanchez discussed the situation she faced during the prior year, her first at Vista del Sol. “My first year was last year. I panicked. We had a large percentage of students in the assistance team process—too many—and we had too many kids qualify. We have a huge population of students who receive special education services. We

created that monster. I cannot guarantee that Tier 1 instruction was given.” Given that a majority of students should respond with adequate literacy growth to research-based, effective literacy instruction within the general education classroom, Ms. Sanchez’ conclusion was that the Tier 1 instruction delivered at Vista del Sol was not proving to be effective. Like the other participants in the study, she focused on raising the quality of Tier 1 instruction, while also providing widespread Tier 2 services, in order to decrease the number of students referred for Tier 3 services. The goal was to create a distribution that would fall in line with more reasonable expectations for literacy development in a K-5 school, represented in Table 3.

*Table 3. Principal Goal: Distribution of Literacy Achievement at High-Need School*

Tier 1
XX XX
Tier 2
XXXXXXXXXX
Tier 3
XXX

X= literacy instructional needs of one student

The principals in this study worked toward the goal of increasing student literacy achievement across the school by elevating literacy expectations as a cultural norm, both beliefs about what teachers and students could accomplish. Part of this cultural norm involved placing the locus of control for student literacy achievement back on teachers

and not allowing them to refer students to Tier 3 instruction without a thorough investigation of whether students had actually received adequate opportunities through effective literacy instruction within the general education classroom. They expected teachers to adhere to effective literacy practices through curricular implementation, ongoing professional development, and coaching. They used student literacy assessment data as evidence of the reality of student achievement at the school, and they supported teachers to analyze data in order to increase their instructional effectiveness. Beyond the general education classrooms, participants put systems in place to increase the amount and effectiveness of Tier 2 instruction.

For many of the participants, distributed leadership models served to support principals in managing the major systematic transformations that needed to occur in order to move these schools into a place where students were at or above grade level in literacy achievement. Districts played a major role in the implementation of distributed leadership models. The hope was that students would benefit academically from the layers of professional educational expertise that put them in the center of efforts toward increased literacy achievement.

### **Culture of High Literacy Expectations**

The six participants spoke of a desire to raise the expectations for both teachers and students. They wanted teachers at their schools to increase their own expectations for instructional practices in literacy. They also wanted school personnel to raise their sense of possibility about what students could achieve. Principals discussed the need to change the culture of expectations as a priority in their first year at their site.



Mr. Li was in the beginning of his first year as acting principal at Carter Elementary, having completed a planning year for this turnaround school. Of literacy expectations, he stated, “We’ve spent a lot of our time grounding ourselves in not only the standards, which are very important, but also coming to a common understanding of what makes for good literacy instruction.” He spoke of “level setting” in regard to how the staff “understand literacy instruction” and “take these standards and really incorporate them in a meaningful way.”

Mr. Li’s goal was to have a “school-wide focus” on a “strong learning environment.” To that end, the instructional leadership team (ILT) had been engaged in conversations about both the technical and philosophical aspects of literacy. On a practical level, the ILT had been looking at the language arts standards and their language arts resources in light of the conversations about literacy outcomes. All of these activities were geared toward the development of a vision for student literacy and school practices that would achieve this vision.

Mr. Taylor sought to increase expectations for the teaching staff by identifying effective literacy-related practices that specific individuals were enacting at Bennett Elementary School. He described a teacher who had made exemplary connections with families and was communicating high expectations for family involvement in literacy. Having identified this exemplary practice, he then pointed it out to the other teachers. “My message is, ‘Man, follow what this other teacher is doing and somehow connect with your families, do those home visits that we’re trying to do, and demand that parents get their kid where they need to be.’” He spoke about the effect this teacher had on the

families of students in her classroom. “And then the next thing you know, the families are on it and she’s on it and both at home and school the kids get to where they need to be as opposed to all of the onus is on this teacher with 27 first graders to get all those 27 kids there.” By praising and drawing out the behavior of a teacher with high expectations, he sought to raise the expectations of teachers in making connections with parents, while also influencing the expectations for parents in regard to their involvement in the literacy achievement of their child. This kind of connection not only benefitted the child, but also created greater family support for the teacher’s efforts.

Mr. Correa recognized it was important to develop a culture of high expectations and then consistently work to maintain it. “I think the two biggest pieces are developing and maintaining a culture of high expectations for our kids, but also for our staff, whether that means high-quality lesson planning, high quality lesson delivery, high quality data analysis on a weekly basis, high quality professional relationship building with their children, those kinds of things, being that the expectation is very high. This is how it needs to look like to meet expectations for the adult level, I think has been pretty huge.” An essential aspect of Mr. Correa’s strategy was to define what high expectations look like; school personnel did not have to speculate on what Mr. Correa envisioned for the dispositions and behavior of employees at Cottonwood. High-quality work pervaded all aspects of the literacy environment from the lessons teachers delivered to the way data was analyzed.

Another essential aspect of Mr. Correa’s leadership was to celebrate accomplishments. “I think we try to celebrate a lot, whether it’s with the adults, just

us. We have weekly staff meetings where the entire focus is on shouting each other out and shouting kids out to keep each other recharged. And it's reenergizing.” In addition to making time to praise each other for work well accomplished, Mr. Correa included student celebrations in these staff meetings in order to reinforce the connection between the work of school personnel and the students they serve.

Ms. Martinelli experienced a series of incidents at her school through which she challenged the expectations teachers had of the students at Mountainridge. She led data team meetings with all of the grade levels and presented writing exemplars that she believed demonstrated the high standards she knew the students could reach. In other examples, she described challenging teachers on their beliefs about what students could accomplish in reading and pushing teachers to move students through DRA levels at a more rapid pace because students’ reading performance was stagnating based on a pace that was too slow.

During my second interview with Ms. Martinelli, she pointed to the fact that principals need to be persistent in raising expectations. Of the challenging discussions with teachers, she described, “I think I would say that while we had those real conversations and raised those perceptions, it's still an ongoing almost battle to follow up and make sure that that the instruction is actually happening at those higher levels versus that tendency to feel like they can't do this...So the mindset hasn't completely shifted even if you have those real conversations. It's just going to take a while to actually have 90% of people believing it. I don't even know if I have 90 yet. But I don't know that you'll ever get a hundred, because I'm just not really certain that you can ever get

to shifting mindsets for all people. Because it is a set. It is a mindset, and you hope to be able to shift it but it can be challenging.” Ms. Martinelli emphasized the important distinction between communicating a vision and then the enactment of that vision in classrooms. She also emphasized that mindsets are not always easy to change.

Student rallies were a ritual both Mr. Correa and Mr. Taylor enacted to raise, maintain, and celebrate high expectations directly for children. Mr. Correa described these events: “So every Friday we've got a student rally. First through fifth grade do it all together in a circle in the gym. We have songs and cheers, and we celebrate attendance, but also behavior and academics. Every week there's a student of the week from each classroom, and they get a college t-shirt. And so I think like building really those high expectations for kids, too. We call it our College Ready Winner of the Week.” Mr. Correa connected high expectations for students at Cottonwood with college readiness by including this phrase in the title of the award. Similar to the way that he defined what high expectations “look like” for school personnel, there was an emphasis on describing the attributes of high expectations for students. He used an example of communications with kindergartners. “And so we're having these conversations also with the preschool and kindergarten students is, what does college readiness look like in kindergarten? You know, a college-ready kindergartner is on task, is doing their work, is x, y, and z.” Participants perceived vision setting for literacy learning as an important aspect of their role. Participants spoke about differences between their own expectation levels and that of the staff upon entering their positions at high-need schools. They were willing to challenge what they perceived as being low expectations and set a high bar for

what students could accomplish in their literacy development. The communicated this vision directly to staff and students through various means and found rituals through which they could consistently reinforce this vision.

### **Leadership Structures**

Leadership structures played a crucial role in the way that school personnel interacted on a daily basis, impacting the ability of principals to build instructional capacity in the area of literacy achievement. Distributed leadership was discussed often by the participants working within this structure, and they appeared to view it as a positive system through which they could affect change in collaboration with their instructional leadership team (ILT). The district was a central player in the implementation of distributed leadership in schools. The participants each described a model with an ILT at the center of primary decision-making about school-wide literacy practices. The ILT consisted of the principal, assistant principal, instructional deans, and senior team leads.

To some extent this model could be envisioned as a pyramidal structure with the principal in a school-wide supervisory role and the other positions increasingly more involved in the daily interactions of the classroom. However, the way that participants explained distributed leadership did not fit this description. Most participants spoke about being highly involved within the structure, both directly with teachers and with the ILT.

Mr. Schmidt explained that he still had a caseload of teachers for whom he was directly responsible. A difference was that he and each member of the ILT had a smaller caseload divided among more individuals. He described the division of labor: “I

actually have a caseload, an official caseload of three teachers...I think before this year the smallest I've ever had is twelve. So it's a huge shift, and then what that enables me to do is I go in and I do co-observations and co-plan feedback with the other ILT members. Our AP has two classroom teachers on his caseload and then the sped teacher, so he has a significantly smaller case load than he's ever had. Our dean of instruction has a caseload of six, so she has the largest caseload but her main focus is just instruction whereas the rest of us have all sorts of other stuff going down. And then we have one team lead, and she supports six teachers as well. She supports ECE and kindergarten, and that's her kind of wheelhouse and her area of expertise. So I'm very excited about that because, we all have smaller caseloads, which is just inherently better because teachers are getting more ongoing support.” Mr. Schmidt discussed that the ILT members were aligned to their areas of expertise. He was in charge of fifth grade, which was his area as a former fifth-grade teacher. Mr. Schmidt used the time that was freed up from the smaller case load to observe classrooms with other ILT members. Rather than divesting from classrooms that were not a part of his reduced caseload, he was investing more by observing with other ILT members.

In comparison to the prior year at Espinar Elementary School, Mr. Schmidt described the implementation of a distributed leadership model as a relief. “That's a major improvement for us this year. Last year when I came in my first year before we had the redesign plan. It was just myself and the assistant principal doing everything, and it was tough.” Not only did this division of labor enable the teachers at the school to have

more individualized support from school leaders, but it also relieved the principal by creating greater shared responsibility.

Whereas the senior team leads were described as having more consistent involvement on a daily basis in classrooms, participants discussed being highly involved with teachers through meetings that brought them in consistent communication with teachers about instructional practices. Mr. Li explained that distributed leadership was organized at Carter Elementary so that the principal was not distanced from teachers, but actually formed a crucial “thought partner” for them. He talked about the importance of tight collaboration within this leadership structure: “While there is a hierarchy I also think that distributed leadership allows you, if you're calibrated, to be able to do more close and personalized work with individual teachers or teams that you probably wouldn't be able to do if you just had a principal on top.” Mr. Li believed that this model, if participants were attuned with one another, provided a means to give greater individualized attention to teachers and their work within their classrooms.

Both Mr. Correa and Mr. Li described how meetings were set up so that they might take one grade level of teachers and work closely with them, while the deans and senior team leads would each work with a different group of grade-level teachers. Mr. Correa provided an example of how the grades might be distributed: “So we'll kind of divide and conquer sometimes. So I'm going to go back and forth between fifth and fourth grade, and my instructional dean might do first, second, and third grade. And the AP might do kinder or early ed. or something like that.” During the meetings, Mr. Correa

said that he would be engaged with the teachers in his group by “posing questions or offering some feedback or wonderings, thoughts, or ideas.”

After these meetings, Mr. Li discussed the fact that the ILT would take time to talk about how the teachers were doing at various grade levels, where teachers were struggling, and whether there were issues in common that might indicate the need for PD for a certain grade-band. Another important part of the communication among the ILT was to pinpoint an important insight that had occurred within the meetings. These insights would be shared with the entire staff in an effort to replicate effective practices throughout the school. Mr. Li provided an example: “Third grade came up with a really keen insight around how to reteach the standard, and we didn't have that Aha moment in fourth and fifth grade. Let's find a way for third grade to really call that out and share what they've learned.” Consistent communication among the ILT, as well as direct involvement of all ILT members with teachers, enabled unique realizations to surface and provide important ideas for improved instructional practices.

Distributed leadership also provided a structure through which principals could learn from team leads. Mr. Schmidt observed, “I feel like I know instruction well and over the years I have gotten better. I feel very comfortable in fifth grade, but the structure that we have now enables me to go into an ECE classroom with our team lead who really knows it, co-observe, come back, chew on the debrief together, strengths, areas of growth, which is building my instructional capacity at some of these lower levels in a way that otherwise wouldn't be happening.”



Mr. Schmidt went on to explain that the ILT meetings were also raising levels of understanding among the whole group. Specifically naming his instructional dean as “possibly better than anyone I’ve ever met” and “making us all stronger,” he observed that the model was creating a forum for processes where they were “all pushing on each other to get stronger and we’re all building instructional capacity in one another.” Of his interactions directly in the classrooms with the instructional dean, he said, “And then I’m just looping in occasionally, doing some co-observations, sitting in on the data teams, and just kind of approaching the work that way, which has been nice because then I can also learn from and have my understanding deepen and build capacity myself to be working with someone who is an ECE-kinder expert, who’s supporting that team in terms of coaching and even evaluation.” Recognizing that preschool and kindergarten were not his expertise, collaborative efforts with the instructional dean who was an expert in this area, provided a model for him of how to observe, coach, and provide feedback in these early grades.

Of the participants who worked within a distributed leadership model, Mr. Taylor appeared to be the one participant who was less inclined to continue to be hands-on within the structure. This aligned with his belief that being an instructional expert was not realistic, given all of the other duties of the principalship. “I think I will be one of the first people to say I think it’s unreasonable to be the instructional expert in the building and do all the other things that you’re supposed to do as a principal.”

For instance, a difference between Mr. Schmidt and Mr. Taylor could be seen in the way they approached observations. Whereas Mr. Schmidt had seized the opportunity

to conduct co-observations with the other members of the ILT, Mr. Taylor stated, “The other thing that we obviously do is observation feedback, but it’s fun just trying to reflect out loud with you just how many observations I’ve done with teachers around reading instruction. I cannot think of a time when I’ve seen someone do some reading instruction, then me say, ‘Oh, what you’d really need to be doing is. I can tell that you’re not even starting to point at the words. You’re not doing this’ and give some feedback around direct reading instruction.”

It did not appear that Mr. Taylor made use of the opportunity to collaborate with other members of the ILT in order to conduct co-observations or create moments of reflection with the purpose of improved instruction. “But I am counting on others to provide the coaching around best literacy instruction.” He discussed giving feedback that was more general such as making lessons shorter or there needs to be more turn-and-talk, because of his belief that “education needs to shift from ‘sage on the stage’ and kids in desks to...kids are 100% engaged with each other, and the teacher simply facilitates.”

Whereas the other principals saw distributed leadership as a means of becoming more involved in effecting change through a focus on higher leverage points in literacy instruction, Mr. Taylor appeared to see distributed leadership as more of an opportunity to divest of the work of building instructional capacity. “I like to, I think, lead through distributing, providing the services, providing the structures, making sure that the systems are in place so that the teachers are getting what they need, but it’s not necessarily going to come through me as the sole instructional expert in the building. I mean, teachers know more than I do, or I should say some of the teachers in my building absolutely

know more than I do in terms of instruction.” A distinction that could be made between Mr. Taylor and the other three participants engaged in distributed leadership is that the other three participants were working to design systems within the distributed leadership model that would create cross-pollination of ideas in an effort to build instructional capacity among all school personnel. Dialogic inquiry was a key to increasing the effectiveness of literacy instruction and student achievement through distributed leadership.

Although Mr. Taylor did not speak about such dialogic inquiry directly within the ILT, he did discuss this sort of exchange as he took a very hands-on approach in leading data team meetings within his office. In this way, he sought to have direct involvement with teachers and instructional leaders and to create that space for building instructional capacity. This will be discussed in a subsequent section.

**Coaching Teachers.** The position of senior team lead was highlighted in my interviews with participants at distributed leadership schools. Senior team leads were described as exemplary teachers. They continued to teach half of the day in their own classroom and were then released to “go and do observation, feedback, coaching, supporting planning, modeling teaching” with their caseload, consisting of about six teachers who taught at approximately the same grade level as the senior team lead. This was a position the district had recently created. Most principals spoke very favorably of it, citing that it provided ongoing coaching for teachers that was focused directly on the work in their classrooms. One principal did not speak favorably of the role, observing that some senior team leads found it difficult to make the leadership

transition to coaching and evaluating other teachers who had previously solely been fellow teachers.

At the time of my first interview with Mr. Taylor, the district had provided Bennett Elementary School with the financial support for senior team leads. Bennett was about to be a center of publicity on this change. Mr. Taylor told me, “The superintendent is coming out next week to do a big press conference at my school around the role of senior team leads and just how important they are and how great this is.”

Mr. Taylor had already created a position similar to the senior team leads prior to the district focus on this employment category. He had replaced one literacy interventionist with three instructional coaches. He considered this move to be “controversial,” but he believed this was a better use of district monies. Mr. Taylor reflected on this move: “But to me it was this interesting decision at some point to say, ‘Hey do we want to keep getting interventionists to work with small groups of kids to help make sure those kids are there, which I think is great, or do we go for a coaching model to try in a sense to bring everyone up in the building. And I was more into I would rather get teachers to increase their pedagogical skill and help in the classroom, almost Tier 1 more than Tier 2 or Tier 3.’ Referring to the new literacy program, he explained that he had “tried to put our money on coaches so that all our teachers would have the support to implement the program.” Having coaches embedded full-time within the school was a very different model than having one reading interventionist who worked directly with teachers, and it would serve different needs.

A rationale for this different model was that high-need schools oftentimes have a relatively large percentage of students below grade level. One reading interventionist might be able to work with a small number of students in comparison to the large numbers that needed help. Mr. Taylor decided to hire coaches who could “help in the classroom, almost Tier 1 more than Tier 2 or Tier 3.” This meant that he was focusing these coaches on the general education classroom teachers in order to boost their effectiveness in literacy instruction.

Similar to the position Mr. Taylor created at Bennett, the senior team leads fulfilled a need for ongoing coaching and support of teachers. Mr. Correa summarized their work and the benefits to building instructional capacity: “They have the opportunity to teach at very high levels and effectiveness for half of the day, and then they have release time to coach their colleagues. And so they do regular observation and feedback cycles. So at a very minimum every teacher in our building is observed for it could be 20 minutes-30 minutes and then that comes with a debrief, feedback that is about the same in length. Supports also include planning, so if a teacher is struggling in that area then their coach will sit with them side-by-side and plan with, do some co-planning, or offer feedback on lesson plans.”

Principals focused on the fact that senior team leads were exemplary teachers, proven based on academic growth data. They liked the fact that they could rely on these individuals to be directly in the classroom in order to improve the instruction of teachers who were less experienced or less effective. According to the principals where this position existed, it appeared that these individuals had an essential role in maintaining the

focus on best practices, sharing their expertise, and giving advice to other teachers in order to raise the school-wide effectiveness of literacy practices.

### **Data Use**

Use of data was a focal point for many participants. The literacy data, discussed by participants, ranged from informal assessments administered by teachers to computerized programs to achievement test results. Principals communicated their belief that a sophisticated understanding of student literacy needs would not be possible without the ongoing use of data. Importantly, data was not just used by a few specialists at the schools; principals led a comprehensive effort to get teachers involved in analyzing literacy data in order to effect changes to future instruction. Data analysis formed a feedback loop to the practices that occurred within the classroom. The district, where most of the participants were employed, played a major role in the focus on data and the ways that data were used.

Mr. Taylor used the term, body of evidence (BOE), for the literacy assessments that teachers brought to data meetings at Espinar Elementary School. He described their attempt to group students based on three data points: “And so once a month they will use a recent running record from their guided reading groups. They will have their students do the online Istation assessment and do a writing sample...And this isn't really an exact science, but we're getting stronger with this is just triangulate the data and then put them [students] into an overall proficiency band.” Espinar Elementary School had been analyzing data as a consistent school-wide practice for only one year prior to my first interview with Mr. Schmidt, who alluded to the fact they were still trying to create

processes for how to use the data. Based on the BOE, teachers would be able to group students for instructional purposes.

Many schools specifically designated rooms for weekly meetings. This was supported by the district where most participants worked. The school staff would bring literacy data they had collected and analyze it in grade level teams. Beyond creating a space for school staff to come together to analyze data, the data room sent a message that analyze of student performance indicators was of central importance to the school. Of the data room, Mr. Schmidt stated, “A big reason we did this is to just create a data-driven, data-focused culture for the staff. And just having the wall up there is just a reminder of where kids are and the sense of urgency in just making sure our teachers, which wasn't happening previously, understand where the kids are. So that's important.” Data presented a reality check to teachers in a school that was trying to move out of its status as being the second lowest performer in the district.

Similarly, Ms. Martinelli organized a data walk in what she described as her first literacy leadership move at Mountainridge Elementary School. Rather than taking on the onus of lecturing teachers about the current low achievement levels of students, she let the data speak by opening up the space for teachers to draw their own conclusions after viewing the data. This also served to move the teaching staff into the mindset of using evidence to analyze literacy instruction. Ms. Martinelli was sending a clear message to the teachers that the way things were going to change under her leadership.

Instead of a designated data room at Bennett Elementary School, Mr. Taylor displayed charts of data on the walls of his office. From there, he led data team meetings

with teachers. This could be considered a move on Mr. Taylor's part to centralize the data under his control, but it also speaks to the fact that Mr. Taylor's office was an activity center with staff and students regularly meeting in there for various reasons.

Teachers in the early grades met with Mr. Taylor to discuss the data. He led these discussions and used the meeting time as an opportunity to tie data back to instruction. "We have six weeks data conversations, where every six weeks, we just come in and we look at reading levels and it's just this accountability, right? It's not my personality per se, but really this idea of, 'Okay, great. Here's where all your kids are. I see that you moved this group of kids here. How did you do it? And I think we try to be very intentional around, at the end of six weeks, we say, 'Great.' We pick three or four kids, 'Tell me what your strategies are. What are you going to try and do with those three or four kids?' And then in six weeks, I am going to ask you, 'How did it go and what did you do?' etc., etc." Consistent with Mr. Taylor's leadership style, he used specific examples of increased literacy achievement in order to spotlight particular teachers and then tap their expertise in front of the entire group so that others would replicate the practice. He also focused on students who were at the lower performing rung, asked teachers what their next steps were going to be with these students, and then notified them that he would be asking about their progress in the next data team meeting.

Mr. Correa and Ms. Sanchez spoke about changes to the use of particular literacy assessments and how this impacted their work. Both schools where these participants worked had recently made a transition to the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016), a computerized assessment system. At the time of the first interview, neither of them had



enough experience with this assessment to discuss it in great detail. Mr. Correa summarized, “So now we're using Istation, and it's new to us. We're just learning it, and I think we just finished our nineteenth day of school. So the data is very fresh, and the reports and how we use them to inform instruction. It is very new for us, but I think that there's a lot of helpful things there.” In the case of Mr. Correa, the district had made the decision to transition to the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016). He had a more positive outlook about the change than Ms. Sanchez did in my first interview with her.

For Ms. Sanchez, the state had made the choice. Ms. Sanchez expressed some annoyance with the switch in the first interview, because she had invested a great deal in getting all teachers trained with the DIBELS during the previous year. She had led some of the trainings, herself, and then even had a district instructional coach come to the school every Wednesday to update teachers on how to use the technology-supported format. Now, the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) was replacing the DIBELS.

However, by the second interview, the transition to the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) had occurred and she saw positive aspects of the assessment. Of the teachers at Vista del Sol, she said, “I think they like it. I think initially we had to sell it to them a little bit as far as it can progress monitor for you. So for your kids that you know are struggling, when you go to the computer lab you can put them on Istation, they can take it. And it's going to grab it for you. It's going to show you where they are. It'll show you where you need to focus your interventions on. So we had to do this selling of it in that way first, because we just got them to buy into the DIBELS. And I was like, ‘Okay, well it's gone. We're going to this now. Yay!’” Ms. Sanchez discussed the fact that the

new system broke the reading process down into six components and displayed a graph for every student on every component. Teachers could, therefore, see how each student was progressing on each of those components. She viewed this as a positive aspect of the new assessment.

Ms. Martinelli also spoke of the changing assessments at the state level and the fact that the constant transitions from one assessment to another had clouded the reality of poor literacy achievement at Mountainridge Elementary School. She, too, spoke positively about the change to the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016), but most of her conversations revolved around state achievement tests. Because there had been a series of recent transitions from one achievement test to another, it was difficult for teachers to see that Mountainridge had actually fallen considerably in student literacy performance. In addition, because the district and state performance framework looked at different data indicators, a school could be considered to be adequate in growth on one framework but not on another. Having worked in the district for many years, Ms. Martinelli was well-versed on the confusing situation that left teachers thinking Mountainridge was actually performing well in literacy achievement when they were not. “And they just saw the color of the school, the SPF color. And so when all you see is green, it's really hard to know that there's something wrong with what's happening. Does that make sense? That we have gaps, and that we have kids that aren't successful. So we have the school performance framework. We have the district performance framework, and then there's the state school performance framework. And so the district one is slightly more rigorous than the state one. And so you tend to have a nicer color on

the state than you might on the district. Sometimes, they're the same color, but the district one has more measures.” All of these inconsistencies from one assessment to another and one performance framework to the other resulted in the decision Ms. Martinelli made to post data on her first day and let the teachers come to their own conclusions. In this way, she attempted to demystify literacy data and bring it under the locus of control of regular teachers at her school. “It's sort of like using that data to get people asking questions, to get people to move in that direction.”

A question that arose during the transition to the Istation (Imagination Station, Inc., 2016) for the teachers at Cottonwood Elementary School was whether they would still need to directly administer informal diagnostic literacy assessments. Mr. Correa described the issue and his response to it. “We had teachers ask us at the beginning of the year, does this mean we don't have to do DRAs anymore? And our response is, ‘Well technically from a compliance perspective of you needing to enter those datas into the platform which we report back out for READ Act, the answer is, ‘No. But with Istation, you never get to hear a kid read, and so we kind of still expect you to do a running record and hear students reading and have that person-to-person analysis of where are the instructional next steps for the kiddos.” Mr. Correa voiced the importance of looking beyond state accountability and district compliance in order to prioritize the assessment data they needed to ascertain the literacy needs of each student. Similar to Ms. Martinelli, Mr. Correa wanted teachers to take ownership over data in such a way that it actually informed their daily practice.

Principals in this study described continued involvement with teachers on a variety of levels; data was not an exception to this involvement. Mr. Li and Mr. Correa spoke about being thought partners with teachers during data team meetings. Both of these individuals continued to work directly with teachers in data team meetings, describing a model in which they would work with a group of teachers alongside other members of the leadership team. Mr. Tyler took direct responsibility for these meetings, facilitating data analysis and asking questions to generate ideas for ongoing improvement of instruction. Through his involvement, he also expressed that he was learning more about reading pedagogy and practice based on the conversations that took place in data team meetings.

Each participant saw beyond data as a mere mandate to be followed from district and state headquarters. They recognized the importance of data to inform instructional practices in high-need schools, and they worked to support teachers in taking ownership of data as a tool to analyze next steps with students. Participants spoke about being integrally involved in data team meetings. The constantly shifting landscape of assessments to some extent hindered their progress in leading school-wide changes to how data was used. For most of the participants, district vision and support guided their efforts, encouraging them to make both the space and time in their schools to use data for the improvement of literacy achievement.

### **Literacy Curricula**

A strong theme throughout my interviews with the six participants was the role of the curriculum in their efforts to make improvements to the literacy instruction and

resultant literacy achievement of students at their school. Through the literacy curriculum, the participants commonly sought to move the teaching at their schools in the direction of consistent instruction in order to create an organized scope and sequence between and across grade levels. The degree of consistency they expected to see in regard to teachers' delivery of instruction varied. All of the participants had adopted a new literacy program within their first two years as the principal at their site.

### **Inconsistent Past Use of Curricular Resources**

A number of the participants in the study were faced with a situation, upon their employment as a new principal at a high-need school, which could be described as an “anything goes” environment when it came to teaching literacy. It was clear throughout the interviews that the participants did not consider the extreme looseness of instruction among teachers to be an optimal situation in their goals to increase literacy achievement. Some participants discussed that they wanted to see greater focus on literacy skills and less focus on themes, more alignment to literacy standards and less delivery of random activities. Ms. Martinelli described, “Teachers were just pulling articles based on the theme of whatever it is they were teaching. So they may or may not be at the right level. They may or may not be what you really need to be teaching, the actual literacy skill. Sure, the content matches the theme that you're trying to go with. But if you're actually trying to teach questioning or cause and effect or some sort of comprehension strategy, that might not be what you can do with that piece of text or as I said, it might not be accessible for second grade or it might be too easy for second grade, like it might not be the right level of rigor for what you're wanting to do.”

Ms. Sanchez provided specific examples that paralleled Ms. Martinelli's observations, where teachers were accessing literacy curriculum from various sites, believing the activities were aligned with the literacy standards. However, Ms. Sanchez questioned the alignment of these strategies: "And they were like, 'Oh yeah, they're aligned. I'm going to print them, and we're going to put them out' versus really thinking about, 'Okay guys, we need to do mini-lessons. We need to teach these routines and strategies. We need to do guided reading. We also need to do complex texts with them.'" Her statement suggests that teachers were overloaded with the work of creating all of their own lessons and had turned to the internet to hurriedly find materials as they went about their busy day of teaching children.

In his first year, Mr. Schmidt had identified the fact that the school did not have a "solid curricular resource" or "a clear direction with the resources we were using." Similar to the descriptions of other participants, he discussed a lack of curricular continuity within and across grade levels at Espinar Elementary School. As a former teacher, Mr. Schmidt thought it was unrealistic to expect teachers to create all of their own standards-based lessons in literacy. Yet, that is exactly what had been expected of the teachers at Espinar prior to Mr. Schmidt's employment there.

Ms. Martinelli focused on the writing curriculum in describing the looseness of instruction when she first arrived at Mountainridge Elementary School: "The resources that we were using weren't going to get us there. And if everybody was doing a different thing and had a different idea of how I'm going to teach writing, the kids just each year were trying to relearn something that they may have already known how to do, but

they just had no idea that they knew how to do it.” Ms. Martinelli expressed concerns not only with the quality of instruction but also with the ability of teachers to align their instructional practices in order to ensure that writing skills were being introduced through a scope and sequence that enabled students to make progress from one year to the next. Without the built-in continuum a writing program provides, her concern was that teachers might teach some skills over and over again from one grade to the next but miss others, altogether.

Mr. Li explained an underlying philosophy about working in a school that has a history of lower literacy achievement: “Especially at the beginning of a turnaround, staff—the most successful teams—will make strategic decisions on where we’re going to be very aligned for the sake of a common language, a common framework to talk about the work, for consistency for students year to year, for unity.” Based on his education as an administrator and his experience working in schools that were academically underperforming, Mr. Li chose to use new literacy curricula as one means to unify the teaching staff around a common set of instructional expectations and a way to communicate about how these expectations are enacted in the daily life of the classroom.

Upon being hired, these principals took stock of the situation at their schools, all of which were underperforming when they arrived. Their observations form common themes. Teachers were having to fend for themselves in creating lessons to meet the standards, and the lessons were not optimal. In the absence of literacy curricula, teachers were more focused on class topics or themes than specific skills students needed to

acquire. These principals viewed the lack of literacy curricula as an issue, because it overloaded teachers, created inconsistencies in instruction, and resulted in poor quality teaching. They saw common curricula as one means to put systems in place that would provide unity in schools toward the end goal of literacy achievement.

### **Adoption of New Literacy Programs**

Cottonwood Elementary School had been in turnaround status when Mr. Correa began to work there in a leadership role. He described how the school was using outdated district-created literacy curricula. One main reason for seeking a special school status through the state was to be able to make different choices in the curricula they would use. “And so we were a turnaround school. And one of our strategies for turning the school around was to seek Innovation status... And the reason was our innovation was really largely focused on taking advantage of options for flexibility. So during that time a red or orange school on the school performance framework in our district did not have the flexibility to opt out of district curriculum...For literacy, we were using a district created scope and sequence of resources, which was outdated. And we couldn't opt out of those as a red or orange school, but we could as an Innovation School.” Once the school had obtained Innovation School status, Cottonwood adopted new literacy programs.

As Mr. Schmidt entered his school, he described the priority as identifying “best practices around literacy instruction.” By his second year, they had purchased literacy curricula for all grades. It was obvious that he had taken his role in choosing literacy resources very seriously, speaking at length in our first interview about his trepidations regarding whether he was qualified to make the decision and the options he weighed such



as whether the program also provided PD and bilingual resources. Mr. Schmidt made a clear connection between the impact of the curriculum and implementation of best practices.

Mr. Taylor named his first major leadership move as deciding to adopt a very well-developed literacy curriculum, which included not only teachers' manuals with explicit instructions but also leveled books and an award system designed to incentivize reading and increase students' reading volume. He could have made other choices about how to use the grant funding the school had acquired, but he chose to use it for a new literacy program. Unlike most of the other schools in the study, where literacy programs were different in the lower (K-2) and the upper (3-5) elementary grades, this literacy program reached across all grade levels and even provided a common bank of vocabulary terms to describe various aspects of literacy.

Despite her well-developed pedagogical knowledge and extensive experience as a literacy specialist and special educator, Ms. Sanchez decided that the school needed a literacy curriculum. An important part of Ms. Sanchez' reasoning for wanting a literacy program was based on her history within the school district where she worked. She explained that, when the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) had first been adopted by the state, she had seen how the district had created units of study based on the standards. The issue was that teachers did not know how to use them and were, therefore, left without resources. "We had units of study for Common Core, because no one knew the change and everyone was just like, 'What do you do?' Let's at least do units of study...And so I

got them and started thinking, okay, this is easy. Here's my author's study. Here's my genre study. Here's my guided reading, but if you don't think like that. We left 80% of our teachers drowning, because they don't think like that. They don't know how to unit plan. They don't know how to do that, and then what resources do give them? Whatever they could find." Given her observations of the gap in resources that had occurred through the district-created units of study, which did not provide teachers with enough detail to carry out specific literacy lessons, Ms. Sanchez was convinced that the new literacy program would at least provide teachers with those explicit guides for daily literacy instruction.

Like Mr. Taylor, she adopted a literacy program that reached across all elementary grades. She had not always been convinced that using curricula was necessary. Of her change of mind, she said, "I think I've come full circle. I used to be so against a curriculum, because how can it meet everybody's needs? I mean, that's ridiculous. To finally trying everything myself, as a teacher, and going, 'Okay, yeah, we need to have a curriculum.'" By her second year, she and a team had chosen a curricular resource. She was engaged all summer in analyzing the program so that she could lead teachers in its implementation.

Mountainridge Elementary School had already purchased a writing program, but Ms. Martinelli observed that the curriculum was not being used despite the pronouncements in the 20-page report she had received when she was first hired. She discussed the fact that teachers had come to a decision to use a different writing program than the original one that was supposed to be used. She liked the new curriculum,

because “it’s vertically aligned, and there are the exemplars. And they have the two different score points.” She had also recently led the school in adopted reading curricula.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Literacy Programs**

Principals expressed both relief in having a curriculum and the heavy-lift of implementing it. As a former elementary teacher, Mr. Schmidt knew the time and energy it took for teachers to create their own literacy lessons. “Because teachers have enough going on, and they shouldn’t be creating curriculum. So I wanted something that was for the most part pretty robust and prepackaged and had what they needed. And then they could start to use the professional judgment to pull out the essential elements and modify and meet the needs of their kids, but I wanted to give them something to hold on to.” Hence, in addition to creating uniformity of instructional practice, he sought to reduce the extent of teacher burnout by giving teachers a set of daily instructions they could follow. He saw the adoption of a program as providing a major support to teachers.

Mr. Schmidt also discussed the fact that the school had not only adopted a literacy curriculum in his second year as principal, but also curricular resources for a number of other subjects. He described the “unbelievable amount of newness this year across the board” and that it had impacted his choice of a literacy curriculum. He had chosen a literacy program that many other schools within the district were also using so that the teaching staff at Espinar Elementary School could be assured support at the district level from experts who provided overarching PD for the most common curricula in the district.

In describing the adoption of curricular resources, Ms. Martinelli said that she felt “joy...in having a curriculum.” However, in addition to the rewards, she also noted the

challenges: “But there's a lot of information there. And whenever you get a new curriculum and trying to balance everything else that you're planning for with this new curriculum, I think can be challenging. But the more that teachers are...saying, ‘Oh, I did that and it was so great. I didn't have to do all of this prep for it.’” For Ms. Martinelli, the heavy-lift of unpacking all the components of a new curriculum was eventually balanced by the pay-off of seeing teachers make realizations about its benefits.

Ms. Sanchez had been working extensively to understand the curriculum the school had just adopted and said of the change that it was “hard to make that shift.” She described the curriculum as “turning these teachers’ worlds upside down...I mean my teachers who are strong are like panicked- panicked.” She took on the role of providing extra PD for teachers, after the PD they had already received through the educational publishing company and school district. She walked teachers step-by-step through the curriculum guides in order to reduce teachers’ anxiety.

### **Programs Not a Panacea**

It did not appear that any of the principals believed that the curriculum was going to solve all of the literacy achievement issues at their schools. Ms. Sanchez said, “Right now I can tell you we are completely changing our instruction at our school. So we did get a new program, and I think it’s hard for us, as teachers, to really believe that one program’s going to meet the needs of all students. We know it’s not possible.”

Of the new literacy program, she said, “We already see some deficits. Of course, we’re going to see that. You can’t meet the needs of every kid from one program. But we can hit those deficits after we understand the curriculum and kind of fill in what we need

to and pull other resources.” The message she gave to teachers about the new literacy curriculum was, “We know it isn’t going to meet the needs of everybody. But this is at least going to put everybody on the same page.”

By the middle of the school year, Ms. Sanchez had identified specific literacy skills that were not covered to the extent she believed students needed in order to make strong progress. “But then we’re finding deficits of course... It’s not going to be a hundred percent. The reading foundation skills lack, so we’re having to supplement that.” They supplemented with the intervention materials provided by the educational publishing company, but these were also not producing the results in student progress that Ms. Sanchez wanted to see. Ms. Sanchez made the decisions to supplement with Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2015). She conducted trainings of this program and made sure that all materials were copied off and ready for teachers in the office.

Mr. Taylor also expressed that he did not believe a curriculum could solve all of the issues in literacy, but he asserted that “at the time we needed a tool or resource, because we were not on the same page and so it provided people with something.”

When discussing the adoption of a literacy program, a number of the principals seemed almost apologetic, as though they had heard the message many times that a curriculum was in some way a compromise to teacher autonomy. This sense of compromise could have come out of the fact that many of these principals had been schooled in Whole Language during their early years in education; a number of them had named Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop, the two main Whole Language structures for teaching literacy, as the way they had mainly taught literacy as teachers. A major tenet of

the Whole Language philosophy was that teachers were supposed to use their observations of students and the artifacts students had created to plan mini-lessons for the next day, week, and month of reading and writing instruction. It is possible that using a curriculum to some extent defied the sense of teacher professionalism these principals wanted to convey to the staff at their school and to those outside the school.

However, given the achievement results as reported at the state and district level, it seemed logical to these principals to find a way to make what they considered to be high impact moves as early as possible. The teachers at these schools, which were all underperforming when the principals arrived, had not been able to use the autonomy afforded by professional decision-making to the advantage of student literacy achievement. As Ms. Sanchez succinctly described the situation at her school, “I cannot guarantee that Tier 1 instruction was given.”

The participants saw the adoption of a program, or programs, as one of the highest leverage points in effecting immediate reforms to the literacy instruction in classrooms. A program provided a scope and sequence across the grade levels that ensured that certain skills were not being neglected and others were not taught over and over again. It also provided a norm of literacy practices for teachers at the same grade level. When communicating as a professional community, it afforded a common set of practices and common set of terms from which educational personnel could know and understand the work of others since they were using the same materials in their own classrooms. The participants in this study believed that, despite the incredible up-front work of adopting a literacy program, it was worth the effort.

## **Consistency of Curricular Implementation**

An important question that arose during the adoption and first phases of implementation of the new curricula was the extent to which teachers then needed to actually implement the program. Teachers would want to understand the expectations being placed on them by the new program relative to their daily practice. Teachers would want to know whether the program was to be considered just another literacy resource they could draw from or ignore. In answering this question, Mr. Li explained a continuum of fidelity to the curriculum. “I once saw a PowerPoint slide that was very helpful. It talks about a spectrum of curricular implementation. On one hand, the loosest would be teacher-made, teacher-driven units. And then on the other opposite end of the spectrum would be 180-day, sequenced, scripted curricula that you’re expecting to use for verbatim.”

Knowing that the teaching staff at their schools would beg the question, all of the principals were faced with a decision: where along this continuum of fidelity to implementation did they want the teachers to fall? Given the reasons for the decision to use a literacy program as a school, the principals of this study did not appear to be willing to allow teaching staff to opt out of using it, especially during the initial phases of implementation. The degree to which they had to opt in appeared to vary from school to school.

Ms. Sanchez stated that the administration and teachers had “worked really hard on the math curriculum for the past few years, and people are using it with fidelity and we’re seeing growth.” Based on the academic improvements that had occurred in

mathematics, Ms. Sanchez believed that the same degree of fidelity to the literacy curriculum needed to take place. When teachers asked her and the other administrators at the school where they needed to teach on the continuum, she stated, “And our teachers are not liking our responses to them when we’re saying, ‘You will use it with- I’m going to say the Fword- fidelity.’”

Because she was not assured that the students at Vista del Sol Elementary School were receiving effective literacy instruction, evidenced by the high numbers of referrals to special educational services, she was willing to take a strong stance on the way that teachers would use the literacy program. She was also very honest in telling them that she did not feel she had all the answers. “We don’t know, but we don’t know because we haven’t tried. And when you can show me that it has an adverse effect on students, that’s when I’ll have a conversation. Because it’s not about you and how hard it is. It’s about our students and what they need to get. So down the road if we’re showing that this isn’t working for my kids and this is why and that’s what the data shows, we’ll have that conversation.” The message was clear that the program would be followed with fidelity unless and until the data showed that another route needed to be taken.

In requiring teachers to use the program to the fullest extent, Ms. Sanchez’ strategy was to go full force with every aspect of the curriculum while also making sure that teachers understood the underlying pedagogy behind the program. “And we really needed to get our teachers to really dig in and decompose that curriculum.” This mirrored her own tendencies as an educator to obtain intensive training, such as Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) and Orton Gillingham (Orton, 1937 Gillingham & Stillman, 1956;



Gillingham & Stillman, 1960) to name a few, and then to follow that training with fidelity, living it out through her own teaching practices until she had assimilated and accommodated the training into a complex network of understanding about reading and reading disabilities.

During our first interview right before her second year as principal at Vista Del Sol Elementary School, she spoke about the fact that she had taken on a major project of understanding the curriculum they had just adopted, attending the trainings and taking the curriculum samples home to analyze all of the components. “We went to the training so we would know. But we also had samples that we’ve had since last year that I took home over the summer, because I needed to understand what it does and how it’s outlined.”

Based on her own understanding of the curriculum, which was informed by extensive experience as a reading specialist and special education specialist, she then provided guidance to teachers by taking them step-by-step through the program and explaining it in terms of UDL (CAST, 2011), which is a framework that many teachers in the district understand. For each teacher, she and her administrative team also pulled student data from last year, created professional development plans based on that data, and then required that teachers reflect on how they were using the literacy program to meet the needs of students. All of the actions taken by Ms. Sanchez were designed to ensure greater fidelity to the curriculum, but it also showed the importance Ms. Sanchez placed on supporting teachers in a deep understanding of the literacy program.

Mr. Li voiced a desire to see a “shift toward some kind of unity of practice” but “not unity to the form of complete standardization.” He shared his message: “And what

I've described to folks in turnaround is on the average at our school, on that spectrum, we're leaning towards the tighter model now. And as we build capacity, and as we get to know the curriculum and we get to know each other in teams that the pendulum will slowly swing towards the looser end."

Whereas he expressed that he wanted teachers to be able to make daily decisions with the students whom they teach, he was "erring a little bit on the side of tightness." His hope was that "in a year or two years or three years, we may not be at complete blank slate teachers are writing every unit, but we certainly would be going more towards that direction." However, at the time of the study when the school was in its first year of turnaround status, for teachers who wanted to "veer away from it a little bit," the administration was supportive, but the question administration would be asking those teachers was, "if you're supplementing and if you're shifting the texts within a unit, how can we support you to make sure that it remains grounded in strong literacy instruction and the standards?" The message to teachers was that they could deviate from the curricular directions but, given the turnaround status of the school and the history of weak student learning, they would need to have strong justification for their decisions to teach outside of the guidance of the literacy program.

Ms. Martinelli preferred to use the term "integrity" when describing her stance on curriculum implementation. She chose to use this word over "fidelity," because she believed that there was a connotation to "integrity," which included the idea of thoughtful decision making in response to student data.

Of the question of fidelity to the curriculum, Mr. Schmidt described the move from a tighter to a looser model over time: “It can be a journey, because we get to the point where we're not here on the lock-and-step side of things, but at least want have that to hold on to that, so that at least people can feel supported and at their own pace. Or at the building collective pace, we can move away from that side of the pendulum. I also think there's value to be able to just see some things in aggregate and have everybody on the same page and to notice trends and identify, okay, here's common strengths and kind of pitfalls in terms of how we see things flushing out.”

Embedded in this description of the journey of curricular implementation was the idea that there is scaffolding in place in the beginning so that teachers can be supported by the components provided through a literacy program. Another benefit Mr. Schmidt saw to a tighter model was that teachers could then assess the literacy program together as they became more familiar with it, collectively analyzing how the program was and was not meeting the needs of the students. Based on this sort of collective analysis, Mr. Schmidt explained, “We don't want to be robotic. We do want to own it ourselves; we want to develop our ability to tweak it to meet the needs of our kids...but I want to err on that side just because of everything we have going on.” Mr. Schmidt did not want the teachers at Espinar Elementary School to follow a script from the curriculum. He wanted them to be able analyze the program in light of student needs. But similar to Mr. Li, in the beginning, he wanted teachers to enact the curriculum on the tighter end of the spectrum.

Whereas Mr. Li expressed that teachers could individually deviate from the curriculum if they could present to the administrative team good reason for doing so, it appeared that Ms. Martinelli and Mr. Schmidt were somewhat more inclined to allow teachers to deviate without permission. However, Mr. Schmidt did express a desire to make any major adjustments to the literacy curricula through a collective analysis of the program's strengths and weaknesses, implying that agreement on how to make changes would be more beneficial than individualized decision-making.

In our first interview, Ms. Sanchez wanted the teachers to enact the curriculum with strong consistency unless it proved to be detrimental based on student data. If there was evidence that the curriculum was not meeting the needs of students in some way, it appeared that she wanted to play a major role in deciding how to make changes, stating that she could teach the teachers how to use such other resources to fill in gaps. By our second interview four months later, she had already led PD on Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2015) in order to supplement the program because she felt there were weaknesses in the phonics component.

Similar to Ms. Sanchez, Mr. Taylor expressed a desire to remain on the tighter end of the spectrum of curricular implementation. He stated that following the curriculum was one of the few non-negotiables at Bennett Elementary School. However, in a subsequent interview, he also stated, "I have more fundamental beliefs around kids reading in all sorts of different ways. I don't think it's the program, I don't think it's the curriculum. I mean I really think it's you trying to get to know each kid sitting across from you as a reader and trying to do the best thing possible." While this statement could

be viewed as a contradiction to his stance that fidelity to the curriculum was a non-negotiable, it demonstrates Mr. Taylor's desire to see teachers meet the individual needs of students through a deep understanding of each child in regard to their literacy development.

However, Mr. Taylor also observed that teachers sometimes do not know what to do with a student after an informal reading assessment had been conducted. "We're always talking about, 'Oh, what's the biggest lever for a kid? Like so, okay, I did some reading with you. I did a running record. Okay, I noticed that you're not doing x, y, z. But you're also not doing a, b, c and d, e, f, so I have to hurry up and choose, 'What is the biggest lever?' And I think that's a really, really big struggle for teachers. So I guess I am excited about providing resources or tools that say, 'Look, I'm not 100% sure of what the next biggest lever is, but we're going to try a, b, and c. So let's try a, b, and c for six weeks. Let's try and stay on it.'" For teachers who were not sure about next instructional steps, Mr. Taylor believed the curriculum would provide a guide. This was a major reason for why Mr. Taylor viewed the literacy program at Bennett Elementary School as a non-negotiable.

Mr. Correa, who had been at his school site the longest of all of the principals, had differing expectations for curricular fidelity based on the experience of the teacher. Of fidelity, he summarized that "on the scale of 1 to 10, we're probably a 5." For those teachers who had been at Cottonwood longer and had proven their ability to exercise professional judgment, the expectations for following the curriculum closely were looser than for new teachers. He provided an example: "I have a rookie first-year teacher in first

grade who is a learner, a hard worker. She's going to be a great teacher. She's a few years away from me saying, 'Here's the standards. Here's the scope and sequence. Here's the materials we provided. Go on and do your thing.' Because I don't think, she's just not there."

Like Mr. Taylor, Mr. Correa observed that teachers did not always know how to make the best choices for students. As an example, he described his experience in planning meetings, when he would have skipped a particular lesson in the literacy program, but new teachers had opted to teach it. "And there are lessons when I've been in planning meetings, and I think, this is one that I would skip. That this is not even aligned to our performance-based task that we'll be doing at the end of the unit. Or this isn't aligned to the major standards. Or this question doesn't address the standard or the objective. There are things that I would say, 'I'd skip those things.' I think the challenge is, especially with less experienced teachers is, how do you know when to skip? Right? And they're not skipping it. And so it's hard for me when I'm thinking, do I say, 'Skip it,' because. Or it might be better off to stick to the script. Because if you don't know what you're skipping or why you're skipping something, what I don't want is for you to end up skipping something that you shouldn't." Mr. Correa described how he would discuss these situations with the assistant principal, somewhat baffled because he had never told teachers, "You need to stick to this."

However, despite the fact that he had not directly communicated fidelity to the curriculum, such instances demonstrated that teachers were more inclined to consider themselves to have less latitude in deviating from the curriculum. "It's fascinating,

actually. I think that perception of freedom or not is generally on the 'not' side.” This was a perception he did not necessarily want to change with new teachers, because his observations had led him to believe that they needed more experience before they had the sound judgment to interact with the curriculum with more freedom. For more experienced teacher, Mr. Correa expected teachers to teach from standards and use the literacy curricula, but they had the latitude to exercise their professional judgment in order to supplement from other instructional resources.

On the spectrum of curriculum implementation that Mr. Li discussed, principals' stances landed on the tighter end of the spectrum. Principals tended to want teachers to follow the literacy curriculum with greater fidelity until they could prove that they were making sound professional judgments in veering away from the curriculum. Another approach principals ideally wanted to take with the literacy curriculum was to come to a grade level or school consensus that a particular aspect of the curriculum was not producing achievement results. After general agreement, that part of the curriculum could be abandoned or adjusted.

### **Too Many Resources**

Given that many literacy programs are oftentimes a veritable smorgasbord of activities, meant to be a series of options from which teachers are supposed to pick and choose, it was difficult to discern what fidelity of implementation would actually look like. In reality, it could take weeks to implement all of the varied activities suggested for just a one-day lesson in some literacy programs. Four of my participants made an observation of some sort about this.

Mr. Li commented, “Curricular companies, in the quest to meet all of these expectations, you find often curricula that give you so much that teachers end up either kind of drowning in the resources or not being able to internalize and understand it at a fast enough rate to be able to be decision makers in the process of: this is how I'm going to use it, this is how I will deliver it, this is what I will keep in this is what I will take out.” In reality, it is likely that teachers would need to make important choices among the variety of activities in order to get through the scope and sequence within a school year. Mr. Li noted that the amount of curricular resources could be frustrating to teachers: “And so I'm not sure what the answer is, but it's almost like what we've given folks is so dense or bloated or kind of like overwrought, you know? And we kind of look at teachers and say, ‘But the resources are right there.’”

Ms. Martinelli described the situation at her school: “One of the struggles for teachers is also sometimes the amount of resources is almost too much. I think that we spend so much time focusing on learning the resource and trying to come up with the best questions, such as text dependent questions, that we actually then aren't spending the time thinking about feedback opportunities and how I'm actually going to get my students there.” Her observations indicate that the amount of resources precluded teachers from being able to truly engage in focusing on what students were actually doing based on the lessons. “When you have such a robust resource, if you don't know what's absolutely critical and what's the most important and then what the student work should look like, then sometimes...I know they get stuck in the lower-level stuff and they never get to the real learning.” Ms. Martinelli's solution was to have an administrative intern at the



school, who was knowledgeable about standards and curricular alignment, work with grade level teams in order to help them to narrow down the curriculum so that there was direct alignment between the standards and the lesson plan.

Mr. Correa also discussed this dilemma. “And there are lessons when I’ve been in planning meetings, and I think, this is one that I would skip. That this is not even aligned to our performance-based task that we’ll be doing at the end of the unit. Or this isn’t aligned to the major standards. Or this question doesn’t address the standard or the objective. There are things that I would say, ‘I’d skip those things.’” He continued on to explain that he was reluctant to encourage new teachers to skip a lesson, because he was not sure that they had the discernment to make good judgment calls about this for every lesson and did not want them to skip a lesson that was actually important. However, it is likely that teachers are already making those choices in all of the schools. If they were not, it is unlikely that they would be able to come close to getting through the grade level sequence during one school year.

Ms. Sanchez noted the issue in regard to writing instruction. “What’s happening is that in 30 minutes they’re trying to get through the whole program, and then they only have 15 minutes instead of 30 or 40 minutes for writing. So now we are having teachers who are saying, ‘Nope, I’m setting my timer and when 40 minutes goes off I’m stopping.’ And they’re pushing through a lot faster. And then we have some who are like, ‘Well, we have to get it all in.’ And I’m like, ‘I understand, but this is spiral...Do it and move on. And the writing piece, we’re going to work on them prioritizing the writing piece.’”

Observing that there was too much to get through in one period, Ms. Sanchez pointed out to teachers that they needed to include writing instruction in their language arts lesson. She emphasized the fact that the curriculum would spiral. Skills would be revisited in subsequent lessons, so teachers did not need to wait until mastery of that skill during each lesson.

Mr. Li pointed to the rate at which districts changed curricula as an important component in this inability of teachers to negotiate literacy programs in such a way that they could make sound choices about how to use it. “But I would say I think at the district level, but there's enough political power to be able to buy just a little bit of the time that we keep on coming back to and saying, if we're choosing a curriculum, let's really make a commitment to implementing it well and teaching the practices behind that curriculum before switching to something else. And it seems like at the school level and some of our most experienced teachers, you become kind of jaded to new reforms and efforts, because you feel like we just learned that thing or we just adopted something.” Not only did he believe that districts need to carefully weigh the costs of changing curricula at a rapid rate, but he also expressed that principals could play a role in affecting the rate at which curricula were adopted.

### **Principals' Understanding of the Curriculum**

Participants expressed varying degrees of understanding of the literacy curriculum. Mr. Li juxtaposed the work of school administrators with that of teachers. Given the many directions that principals are pulled, he said of the curriculum that “you never have the opportunity to gain that depth.” Whereas teachers might have a series of

professional development activities and trainings on the curriculum, the principal was given a condensed version and then must move on to other important aspects of the school such as the budget.

Mr. Li stated that, based on a more solid understanding of the literacy program, he would like to have greater ability to observe in a classroom and make assessments of the instruction delivered. However, he felt this more in-depth knowledge of the curriculum never occurred. As soon as he finally felt comfortable with one program, a new program would appear. Hence, the cycle of being unfamiliar with the teaching materials would begin again. “But sooner than you ever expect something changes in literacy instruction, a new way of thinking about it, a new framework, you know something. And so...you always feel like you're playing catch up a little bit.”

In her descriptions of the writing curriculum, Ms. Martinelli discussed changes made over the years. Her strong vision for the outcomes of writing were founded on a solid curricular resource she had used as a teacher. She reached back to a curriculum that was more than ten years old, because she believed the writing exemplars to be on par with her expectations for students at Mountainridge. She also alluded to the fact that she thought the district had abandoned the writing curriculum based on unsound reasoning. She told me that the district had decided to drop the curriculum, because it did not represent the current school population.

She believed that the old curriculum had high standards for writing, and the curriculum they were currently using did not rise to her knowledge of what children could do. Ms. Martinelli’s account speaks to the level of knowledge she possessed about

the resources she actually used as a teacher on a daily basis with students. She expressed that it was different to be a teacher leader, who was actually teaching the same curricula as the other teachers, in comparison to being a principal who had a different role in curricular implementation.

Mr. Schmidt also discussed the differences between what he had taught and what was being taught now at Espinar Elementary School. However, he believed that some of the small group reading instruction was more advanced. He described guided reading at his current school site as “impressive” and stated that “compared to what I used to do when I was teaching small group, it's just like night and day.” As effective literacy practices continued to progress, it was difficult to keep up with these advances when one was not actually in the classroom teaching based on newer strategies.

In his first year, Mr. Schmidt was faced with making an adoption decision of a literacy curriculum for Espinar Elementary School. He said of this process, “One of the larger challenges for me as principal is that I'm not a curricular expert, and so I was put in a position writing the redesign plan to make choices on what curriculum I should use.” When he engaged in challenging conversations with the ECE teachers on the curriculum they were using with preschool children, he expressed, “You know in some ways it's a struggle for me, because I'm not an ECE expert. I don't know what this should all look like. I just kind of have these overarching things that I really want to advocate for and push for.” Mr. Schmidt recognized that business could not go on as usual, given the low achievement levels at Espinar Elementary School and the rising district expectations for the exiting reading levels at kindergarten and first grade. Indeed, he had been brought in

to make necessary changes. However, he did not feel completely comfortable with defining what the literacy program should look like in ECE.

Similar to Mr. Schmidt's sentiments, Mr. Taylor expressed difficulty in defining specifically what he wanted to see from the literacy curriculum. As a former teacher of upper grades, Mr. Taylor reflected on the factors that make up an effective literacy program, he was not sure about what those should be. He alluded to the fact that he was not as comfortable with assessing the components of an early literacy program, which would include aspects of the curriculum such as phonemic awareness and phonics.

What are the components that make up the program? Should it be phonetic?

Should it be phonemic? Should it be this, that, or the other? ...I have a sense of what I want for the school. But I don't necessarily have a sense of this is exactly what you have to do in a reading program.

Mr. Li also made a connection between the grades he taught and his sense of self-efficacy in defining best practices in literacy instruction and the way this would be enacted through the curriculum. "But I don't know that I'm the strongest literacy principal, more specifically the strongest early literacy principal, because of the grades that I taught. I started fourth grade and so I've never really had experience teaching reading except seeing some other really great teachers do it." Given the fact that all three of these principals had formed the bulk of their teaching experience in the upper grades, it is reasonable to assume that their decreased sense of self-efficacy in making curricular decisions for ECE and the early elementary grades was largely due to their inexperience directly teaching these grades.

Likely because of Mr. Correa's prior experience overseeing the K-2 grades at Cottonwood Elementary School, he was able to talk extensively about components of the early literacy program, such as concepts of print and phonics. "We have a Montessori hybrid program here. And so all of the students in those grades are highly engaged in differentiated activities and work with teachers, lessons with teachers or paraprofessionals. They're practicing, you know, right now letter-sounds, one-to-one correspondence, things like that." It is probable that the specific ways that he was able to discuss the early literacy curriculum came from his direct experience with observing these early literacy classrooms in his previous position.

Ms. Sanchez was also able to speak in depth about various aspects of the new program, such as phonemic awareness activities, phonics, and comprehension strategies. She had taken practical steps to understand the curriculum at the same level that teachers would need to understand it to teach with it, breaking it down into the UDL (CAST, 2011) framework in order to connect it to her own prior knowledge and that of the teachers at her school. She also stated that she was the only principal in the district who was attending the monthly district-led curriculum trainings, along with the teachers at Vista del Sol. Given her background and experiences as a reading specialist, it made sense that she would feel a great deal of self-efficacy in digging into the curricular content of the new literacy program and using her extensive network of associations with other literacy trainings, acquired over the years, to understand the entire program.

The many other concerns that called on the attention of these principals became a major issue in understanding literacy curricula in real depth. Mr. Li had expressed this

sentiment. “I think, in a more idealistic world, principals can be more critical consumers, informed consumers of curriculum. I mean if I were given some time to look through a curriculum and say, do I think it's strong or not?” Mr. Taylor felt it was not realistic or fair to expect that depth of knowledge with the many other daily pressures of the job.

Mr. Taylor relied on district experts to make a decision about the choice of literacy programs during his first year as a principal at Bennett. When asked how he would assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in use, he replied, “I think the short answer and maybe the answer that's probably closer to my lived daily reality is all of the curricula that we use come at the recommendation of our district.” Other principals relied on their district, as well as experts within their schools, to fully understand the literacy programs and support teachers in effectively using them.

For some principals, distributed leadership models took some of the burden off of principals to be the main purveyor of the literacy curricula, spreading out part of the responsibility for its implementation to the personnel included in the instructional leadership team. Ms. Sanchez, who did not have a distributed leadership model at her school, appeared to shoulder a greater burden with the literacy curriculum. However, Ms. Sanchez’ direct control over the literacy programs at her site may have also been due to her expertise with literacy and her prior experience as a reading specialist who provided schoolwide oversight of literacy instruction.

Data team meetings provided a forum through which teachers could reflect on whether their instruction was producing adequate gains in student literacy achievement. Thus, these meeting created a common ground on which teachers could take ownership

for the implementation of the curriculum and analyze the results of their own practice.

Data team meetings supported participants in contributing more to the conversation about the literacy curriculum.

### **Professional Development**

Principals wanted teachers to develop strong underlying networks of understanding about literacy theory and pedagogy. Even though literacy programs had been purchased and teachers were expected followed the materials to varying degrees, none of the principals wanted teachers to use the curricular resources without some degree of thoughtful consideration of their own teaching context. Mr. Li expressed that he wanted teachers to understand effective literacy instruction beyond a literacy program. He also wanted this for himself. “Beyond that, I would want more of an ability to go into a classroom and say, this is what solid instruction looks like and less looking for, are we using the thing we’ve given you, but like how can we think about literacy instruction. And to be honest, that’s where I would want my teachers to get as well. Is okay we’re doing Writer’s Workshop now. To me, beyond these color coded books, what I believe about strong writing instruction is. And so they have a lens from which to think about and make sense of the different resources that come in.” Participants sought professional development opportunities, for teachers and themselves, in order to continue to develop their pedagogical understanding and practical skills in literacy.

The adoption of a new literacy program brought with it a flurry of PD, either directly through the educational publishing company or through the district. Principals discussed PD embedded within the school through literacy experts employed on site.



Another form of PD was delivered by Ms. Sanchez, who took on the role of leading literacy PD at her school.

A number of principals mentioned attending PD with the teaching staff. An important act of literacy leadership for Mr. Taylor was to attend the PD alongside teachers. “One of the things I tried to do as a leader was go through all the training with teachers, so that we could all be on the same page. I think that part was important. I never appreciated when you had professional development, and the principal was doing something else. So I think maybe modeling the way of trying to be a learner with the teacher might be one thing I would say I have tried to do.”

Despite the constant time pressures of the principalship, Mr. Li expressed a similar sentiment. “I can't be in every unit planning meeting, but I still attend PDs with them and alongside them and take notes. And I think it sends the right message that we're learning this, it's important, and you have a thought partner in me.” Mr. Li also expressed the importance of attending PD for his own continual growth in understanding literacy. “And so I think my journey has been very much using every opportunity I can to learn just a little bit more about how to support not only all readers but particularly readers who are struggling with reading. And it's a commitment for a principal. If you don't have that, you have to seek it out. That means peeling off of principal PD and sitting with your teachers as they do their early literacy PD. It means asking questions when you see different techniques being used.” In the summer prior to the implementation of their new curricular program, Ms. Sanchez attended all of the PD. She also attended all of the curriculum related PD sessions held by the district during the school year.

## **Publisher-provided Professional Development**

Newly adopted literacy programs became a focal point for one form of PD that teachers and administrative staff attended. In these cases, the district had outsourced PD to literacy program publishing companies. Of the literacy program Mr. Taylor chose for Bennett Elementary School, he listed a benefit as being that it came “right up-front with a ton of training.” In this particular instance, Bennett Elementary School was one of only a few schools that had the funds to adopt this program. Thus, the company that published the program directly provided the PD. This PD was very focused on that specific program, which included a comprehensive system of leveled books and rewards for student reading volume.

A major factor in Mr. Schmidt’s choice of literacy curriculum was the extent to which the district would provide robust PD for teachers to attend. The PD for the literacy programs he chose was led by publishing companies. “I wanted to choose something that a large degree of other...schools were using, because I wanted to be able to take advantage of external opportunities for professional development and support.” He also recognized that there were experts that could be used to build teacher knowledge. “As a principal, I want to know what my limits are. And I don't want, I think I'd be doing a disservice to the kids to pick something out-of-left-field where there's no PD or support or deep understanding even on my level. And then it's on me to develop the capacity in my teachers and understand this.” Mr. Schmidt made use of the PD provided by the district in order to support his teachers in a way that he did not believe he could at the time. An additional benefit was that it created a situation in which he felt the district

was a partner in the development of teacher's pedagogical knowledge and understanding of the particular literacy program, thus reducing the sense that he held sole responsibility for implementation of this new literacy program.

Rather than attend just the publisher-led PD for principals, Ms. Sanchez and the decided to attend every PD session that the teachers would attend. This was a strategic move on their parts to be as knowledgeable, right from the start of implementation, about the literacy curriculum as the teachers. Ms. Sanchez was then able to use this information in order to create her own direction for the literacy program and individualize it to meet the particular needs of the teachers and students at Vista del Sol Elementary School.

### **District-provided Professional Development**

District often took on a more active role in leading PD for literacy models that were well established but did not necessarily come from one publishing company. Ms. Martinelli sent teachers and the assistant principal to the guided reading PD and then had them bring back the information in order to train others. Mr. Schmidt had made a personal connection with one of the district network partner, who was a literacy specialist, in order to obtain personalized training in guided reading for the teachers at Espinar Elementary School who could not attend the wider district course.

Mr. Li also spoke about district network partners. These networks divided the district and oversaw approximately 20-25 schools. He described the PD and other services they provided. "They come in and support by providing professional development, walking through with the principal, providing feedback, running professional development um, so on and so forth. I think that's helpful. I don't know that

they're able to build the kind of relationships with our teachers that really give them the best inroads into changing instruction all the time. I also don't know that they're building school level leadership capacity to be able to do that work absent their presence or their support. And so I would say that if we had more time that would probably be a stronger model.”

In comparing Mr. Schmidt’s account with Mr. Li’s account of the district network partners, it becomes clear that neither participant believed that this employee was able to provide the in-depth PD that was needed for teachers without spending more time at the school. In the case of Mr. Schmidt, he had solved this issue by making a very close connection with the district network partner. Of this district employee, he said, “She spends a lot of time here, because we’re high-needs. Also, we’ve worked hard to have a good relationship with her and kind of plug her into some things that we’re doing here. So we’re fortunate, because she supports the entire southwest network but she spends a lot of time here.” On the other hand as a very recently employed principal within the district, Mr. Li had not been able to make that personalized connection with his district network partner and observed that it would be a stronger model for building instructional leadership capacity if this individual was involved at the site more.

A focus for district-led PD in one district was early literacy. Mr. Li described the sequence of events and content of the PD: “It kicked off with a week of PD, and then we’re following through with four hours of PD from now until the end of the school year every month. And it went over the components of a literacy block. It went through how to administer running records, understand the different errors that children might

make, so on and so forth. I mean I think that's at least a step in the right direction in supporting teachers to understand how to think about literacy, teaching literacy, how to address struggles that they see children may be having.” This focus on early literacy was reflected in many of the interviews I conducted with participants from this district.

### **School-embedded Professional Development**

In regard to professional development that was embedded within the school, Mr. Li spoke of his conceptions of his role as a literacy leader as hiring personnel who can act as literacy experts and provide instructional leadership through PD. “I would say part of my work is finding the right people to fill those roles, who have a passion and expertise in literacy and who can be ahead of us on the learning curve and then provide that professional development for us at the school... We’ve spent a lot of our time grounding ourselves in not only the standards, which are very important, but also coming to a common understanding of what makes for good literacy instruction.” Mr. Li provided opportunities for these school literacy experts to lead PD. But prior to leading PD, he had led conversations with the administrative team about their collective philosophy of effective literacy practices.

Mr. Schmidt spoke about how the conversations between the dean of instruction and himself were opening up a greater understanding of the PD needs of the teachers. He had asked her to lead literacy PD, which occurred on a weekly basis and one a month during their half-day of release time from students. Mr. Schmidt had also created a new position, the intervention-extension coordinator, in order to have a full-time person on staff who would lead PD in literacy specifically for the many groups of support personnel

at the school. Thus, paraprofessionals and volunteer staff attended PD led by this individual.

### **Teacher-led Professional Development**

Ms. Martinelli described another form of PD that involved teachers acting as ambassadors of district-led PD. When district had raised expectations for exiting reading levels of kindergarten students, Ms. Martinelli had called on the district to observe instruction delivered by the kindergarten teachers at Mountainridge Elementary School. When these experts could not provide concrete feedback on improvements, Ms. Martinelli sent volunteers, along with the assistant principal, to the district PD on guided reading and then had those teachers act as experts. They conveyed the PD to other kindergarten teachers and conducted coaching sessions in order to ensure accurate implementation.

### **Principal-led Professional Development**

Ms. Sanchez described that she had spent the month of July learning the scope and sequence of the new literacy program, trying to find the commonalities within the program across grade levels. She then created a “backwards planning template” that incorporated the “themes” of the program, “using the same language” as the program. “We don’t want to confuse them, right? We don’t want to talk about these kinds of strategies when the book calls it, ‘Instructional Topics.’ So we kind of had to do that before, because we don’t want to look like we’re idiots and we’re trying to tell them what to do and we don’t and we’re muddling through it. But for them to go, ‘Oh okay, they did their homework.’ And it’s been painful. Some levels worse than others...Everybody is

using the same template.” After she and the teachers had gone through the district PD on the program, she then followed up with teachers by leading them through the lesson plan template they would use to plan lessons from the program.

After coming to the conclusion that the new literacy program did not have as robust a phonics programs as she wanted, Ms. Sanchez led PD on Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2015) with one grade level of teachers. Other teachers heard about this PD and asked her to conduct PD with their grade level team, also. At the time of our second interview, she was leading a series of workshop on Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2015) with various groups of teachers at Vista del Sol.

### **Student Interventions**

Principals were oftentimes faced with a wide disparity between students above and below grade level in reading/language arts. Mr. Li described the situation in high-need schools. “And I think when you work in schools that we serve, you often find children who have a very wide kind of range of reading, kind of current reading ability or achievement level, and so not only are you trying to figure out how to deliver this lesson but how do you differentiate instruction in strategic ways for my struggling readers and for my advanced readers.” Particularly for struggling readers, principals sought ways to individualize literacy instruction or create additional literacy opportunities. Literacy interventions could be divided into those that were “pull-out” and “push-in” models. All of the schools in the study provided literacy opportunities for small groups or individuals outside of the classroom. These opportunities ranged in depth and intensity.

On the lower end of the spectrum of intensity were programs such as Reading Friends, which was at Bennett Elementary School. Mr. Taylor described Reading Friends as “a cool program in our first-grade classroom where readers from companies...will get on via almost like a skype. You actually can’t see each other’s faces, but...the computer will ring, a kid will go over and answer the phone and...get all excited. And he comes over and he puts on the head-phones...and then they’re both on the screen together, and they read together.” At the end of the year, the student and the business partner met for a celebration.

Mr. Taylor did not believe it was “the end-all-be-all in terms of instruction.” However, he did think it was a “good thing” to connect students with “someone who can bring excitement and wants to read with kids.” For this reason, he stated that he supported Reading Friends, but he emphasized as he spoke about such programs that “at the end of the day, what’s more important is how are we supporting our classroom teachers to become better reading instructors.”

Another pull-out program that was in place at Bennett Elementary School was Reading Tutors, with a full-time coordinator who organized 75 volunteers working one-on-one with students twice a week for 45 minutes. The program had a set of literacy guidelines that each volunteer needed to follow with mandated activities based on the approximate reading level of each student. Mr. Taylor expressed “how exciting for us to have this resource” and that he loved that “it’s someone who’s coming in from outside the school that is most likely passionate about reading, and they get to share that with kids.”



However, he also observed, “And sometimes I think it’s kind of an interesting struggle in terms of the classroom teachers don’t get particularly excited if kids are pulled from the classroom for reading instruction.” Based on this issue, he concluded by reiterating his stance on the centrality of the teacher in providing literacy instruction, but also expressed appreciation for the individual connection each of the volunteers made with the students. “I mean I get both sides. I’m going to be one of the first people to say I am appreciative of the additional reading instruction. However, the classroom teacher is really the person I am counting on to be the expert of become the expert or become...stronger instructionally.” It was clear that Mr. Taylor did not view the literacy interventions at Bennett as a replacement for effective instruction delivered by the classroom teacher.

Mr. Schmidt spoke at length about student literacy interventions in place at Espinar Elementary School. Unlike the interventions at Bennett, which were all individualized, the interventions at Espinar were all conducted with small groups. This paralleled the differing beliefs of Mr. Taylor and Mr. Schmidt. Whereas Mr. Taylor placed strong value on creating many individual relationships between students and adults, Mr. Schmidt placed strong emphasis on small group instruction. Mr. Schmidt’s focus on small group instruction was aligned with the current district philosophy.

There was a host of volunteers and paid employees. All of them worked directly to boost reading achievement at the Espinar Elementary School. The paraprofessionals provided push-in services. Volunteers provided both push-in services during the school day, as well as tutoring during the after school period, called Power Hour.

Mr. Schmidt believed it was important to make sure that each individual was being used to the best advantage of the school. He stated that “we have to be thoughtful with how we utilize our people” and did not want the extra adults on site to be used “just for crowd control or making copies or any of these things.” For this reason, he created a new position - the intervention-extension coordinator - through grant monies received from the state department. The role of the intervention-extension coordinator was to: manage the extended day; coordinate the personnel who work with small groups of students in literacy; connect with classroom teachers for advice and feedback on small group literacy instruction; use the literacy data to make related decisions; and train school support personnel on best practices in literacy with a focus on Guided Reading Plus (Dorn & Soffos, 2010). A major reason for the creation of this position, which he described as a “touchpoint for anyone doing small group instruction,” was to avoid “siloe work and work that's isolated and maybe not supportive of one another.”

Mr. Schmidt had committed to having two adults in every classroom in order to provide students with more direct instructional time with an adult in literacy, but he also saw that this could place an additional burden on teachers. “I don't want to tell a teacher, okay you need to plan for your reading groups, you need to plan for your para's reading groups, because it's just too much.” The extension-coordinator oversaw all of the individuals who worked with small literacy groups both within classrooms and during the afterschool hour, not only organizing the children they would see but also providing PD to develop the skills of these individuals so they were working effectively with students. The coordinator also used data to identify the students in most need of literacy support

and organized schedules so that these individuals would have at least two small group literacy sessions during each day. In this way, Mr. Schmidt was seeking to raise the reading achievement of all student while focusing on providing additional support for struggling readers based on the students with the highest need.

Despite the fact that the most struggling readers might be pulled out twice a day, Mr. Schmidt believed that teachers were not opposed to the interventions that were taking place. “But I don't think anyone's too unhappy about the fact that in many ways we're double- or triple-dipping our neediest kids. Again, I don't want to repeat myself but let's guard against doing it in a way that feels fragmented or we feel like the kids are being pulled out so much that they're never there. And I don't think we have that problem for the most part because again everything is done internally in all of these classrooms.” The position of intervention-extension coordinator created an organized effort for supplying extra literacy interventions to students. Teachers may have felt more comfortable with students being pulled out of class, knowing that an expert was ensuring this time away from the classroom would be well spent.

Mr. Schmidt described his vision for the smooth operation of student interventions and small group instruction. “So we're on a journey, but ultimately it needs to be that well-oiled machine where different adults are working with different kids, and then the other kids are cycling through something meaningful, and every second is maximized for just again moving the kids' literacy levels.” With grant monies, Mr. Schmidt sought to most effectively make use of the resources at the school through a

complex system of small group support with the goal of bringing every students up in their literacy achievement.

As an incoming principal, a major issue Ms. Martinelli saw immediately was the relatively poor quality of instruction struggling readers were receiving within the RTI framework. As she described, paraprofessionals were being used almost exclusively for interventions with struggling readers. This presented a major issue, given the fact that paraprofessionals were the least qualified employees to deliver instruction to the students who most needed teachers who were highly trained in effective reading instruction. In addition, the delivery of instruction was not systematic. “There was no intervention for kids that struggled, or actually there was, but it was only paraprofessionals that did it, and it was not systematic. It was just whatever that teacher asked them to do at that moment is what they did with this group of kids. So there was no progress being made for our most struggling readers. And so it was just kind of flat and really just weren't doing what we needed to be doing for kids.” Given her background as a teacher who had led the effort to restructure her previous school for RTI, it became a major priority to see that improvements were made to the instructional delivery system for students in need of assistance in literacy. The teachers’ analyses of the current reality of student literacy achievement, prompted by a school-wide data walk, became a catalyst for change in this area.

In terms of optimization of human resources, another question arose about the Tier 3 intervention used at the school. The number of students that could be served at one time by the Tier 3 program was limited. Given the large numbers of students who needed

immediate support in reading/literacy, Ms. Martinelli wondered whether the program was a good fit for the school. She had been introduced to the program at her previous school and speculated on how it would work if she were actually using the program as a teacher: “I thought I don't see how this is going to accelerate kids, because I actually have them in my group the entire year and you're only supposed to have three kids and a group, that's really not going to mathematically work in a school. And I'm one person and if I can only meet with three kids at the time, and I have to meet with them for 40 minutes to do this, that's not going to move.” Ms. Martinelli concluded that neither the situation of using paraprofessionals nor one interventionist were optimal means to deliver Tier 3 instruction at the school. Her observations about the interventionist mirrored those of Mr. Taylor, who eventually traded in the one interventionist for more coaches.

Ms. Sanchez and Mr. Correa spoke very specifically about the various types of interventions at their schools. They were knowledgeable about the actual reading practices that took place with different literacy interventions. As a former reading specialist and special education teacher, Ms. Sanchez related her perspective on reading interventions to her own experiences. “I think for the longest time I was very whole language based. Reading Recovery is whole language, except it doesn't work for everybody. So when I started to doing it, I was like ‘Why isn't this working? I don't get it. I'm one-on-one with them. Why am I not understanding this?’ But then once I got trained in Orton Gillingham, I kind of started to make that connection. And that was maybe after five to six years teaching.”

Based on her own knowledge as a reading specialist, she described the importance of assigning students to the right type of intervention. She discussed the similarities of Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) and Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) as whole language-based programs. “If I have a kid in Reading Recovery, and they didn’t successfully exit, the next year we don’t do LLI, Leveled Literacy Intervention, because it’s whole language and whole language. This kid does not need whole language obviously. They need Orton Gillingham, or they need another phonics base... You find others who have other training to help the kids.” By making concrete distinctions between the components of literacy that took place in different interventions, Ms. Sanchez was aware that interventions did not always equate with reading progress if a student’s specific needs were not actually addressed.

Mr. Correa had a similarly fine-grained understanding of various literacy interventions as Ms. Sanchez. He even used a similar example as Ms. Sanchez. “At our school, we also have lots of interventions in place. So some kiddos who, for example, are struggling with phonics or that piece, we’re not necessarily putting them in Leveled Literacy Intervention which has a stronger focus on comprehension. Some of our kids are okay with their fluency, but comprehension is where we need to focus on. They’re being pulled in small group as well by our Literacy Fellows for Leveled Literacy Intervention. The kids who are struggling with phonics and things like that, their intervention is going to look different. It might be like Wilson Foundations or our general curriculum. We use benchmarks in the early grades. It already comes with an intervention component and lots of resources for phonics and phonological awareness.”

Both Mr. Correa and Ms. Sanchez made a distinction between interventions that target comprehension and interventions that target phonology. Based on this distinction, they worked to ensure that students were placed in the intervention that met their needs based on assessment data. Mr. Correa also spoke about getting updates from the literacy coordinator in order to gauge the extent to which interventions were successful.

Principals reported involvement in either obtaining resources for student interventions or organizing student interventions at their schools. They discussed it as part of their role as instructional leaders. Participants were able to describe these interventions in some detail and were aware of the various components of the reading process they targeted.

### **Early Literacy**

Most of the principals pinpointed early literacy in their discussions about increasing expectations for their school. Carter Elementary School did not have an ECE program, but Mr. Li spoke about wishing there were opportunities for students to begin their literacy journey earlier than kindergarten. He discussed at length a birth-3 classroom he had observed and expressed his desire to see a similar program at Carter. He was clear about that fact that he did not want to consider students coming in to the school to be at a deficit on their first day of kindergarten: “I think I'm a principal who, I reject some of the common belief that our children come into preschool and they're so far behind. I think sometimes when I hear that, I understand the spirit, which is some children have had a literacy-rich first four years of their lives and others haven't. I guess the point that I reject, I'm not going to tell a child on his first day of school that he's already so far behind. But I

do understand that home environments can be very different and, sometimes families speak other languages or may be very busy with work or trying to make ends meet or have other things in their lives. They may feel like they're not in a position to be able to teach their children literacy, as perhaps my family or other families are able to do with children at a young age." While recognizing that he did not want to label students as academically deficient as they entered Carter, Mr. Li also spoke about a reality at high-need schools that students may not have been exposed to the rich early literacy environment he had been exposed to as a child. An ECE program would, to some extent, roll back the sphere of influence the school had on children so that they could be exposed to that literacy rich environment at an earlier age.

Pressures from the district were a consideration in focusing to a larger extent on ECE programs and the influence schools could have on the beginning phases of literacy development. For some of the participants, including Mr. Li, the district where they worked had raised the DRA scores that students were expected to reach in the early elementary grades. This had caused a reconsideration of what should occur in those grades, as well as in the preschool program if the school had one. Mr. Taylor explained the change of district policy on early literacy. "So the district...in general has kind of had this shift to early literacy as a major focus. So I'd say back in the day, it used to be third grade and any of the testing grades, third, fourth, and fifth. Reading by 3. So if you don't read by 3, you're hosed and you're not going to graduate and, 'Oh my God, you're in trouble.' Right? And so now I think there's this huge push...for a big, big focus on early literacy. In other words, we want to know where every kid is in kinder, and we want to



know where every kid is in first, and we really want to raise the bar.” Ms. Martinelli mirrored Mr. Taylor’s understanding of the new district expectations for reading levels, explaining that the district had raised expectations for DRA levels in kindergarten, which would be phased in as year-end targets of a DRA 3 to a DRA 6 within two years.

A number of principals led difficult conversations about the changing expectations of early child education (ECE). For some participants, these conversations became bifurcated debates about the nature of ECE. For others, kindergarten became a focal point for making changes to the overall goals and objectives of early literacy and how this would look within the classroom.

During his first year at Espinar Elementary School, Mr. Schmidt experienced friction with some teaching staff about the nature of ECE, a district program offered at the school. He described a philosophical debate in early childhood education (ECE) between play and academic activities. “I would say one thing that’s come up as a challenge in our ECE is an ongoing conversation that we have gaps—significant gaps—and we have to do things differently for our kids. And I think for ECE it just gets boiled down to the point where in ECE if we’re talking about, and I don’t think personally that it’s kind of a zero-sum situation, where you necessarily have to rob one to work toward the other, but it’s just this balance of social skills development and play versus starting to ingratiate into the instructional world and we’ve gone back and forth.” Mr. Schmidt recognized that there were “two camps” on this issue, but he did not believe that these two aspects of the ECE program needed to be dichotomized.

Mr. Schmidt was concerned that, if the ECE students were not being exposed to activities that would increase their readiness for kindergarten through explicit academic experiences, this would negatively impact the ability of these students to perform on district assessments that measure their prerequisite reading skills, such as the word analysis test. He reasoned that it was necessary to develop the skills that would get preschool children ready for kindergarten, especially given the fact that the district had raised its expectations for the DRA reading levels of exiting kindergartners and first graders. If these skills were not taught, it put greater pressure on those who would teach ECE children in subsequent years. “And we’re telling our kindergarten teachers that they need to be hero by the end of the year and then our first-grade teachers. I mean we’ve raised the bar as a district and as a school on everybody, but it hasn’t trickled down to ECE.” Mr. Schmidt believed that they needed to fall on the “rigor side” of the debate in order to ensure that the school was not doing a disservice to children. “I know there’s push-back. Well it could be there’s a different way to approach everything, but we’ve been doing just the play for years. And you look at our historical data in schools like ours, and it’s not working. There’s a reason we’re turnaround.” He saw the move toward greater infusion of literacy in the ECE as a future direction and gave that message to ECE teachers. “I understand that there’s two camps and what not. I would say this more diplomatically and have said it more diplomatically, but really if you’re too far on the play camp this probably isn’t the place for you.”

In taking a strong stance on the changing expectations for early literacy work, he came back to the reality that the school was in turnaround and there was a reason for that. He had been hired to make changes at the school, and he saw this as one necessary change.

Ms. Sanchez described similar conversations about literacy expectations with the kindergarten teachers at Vista del Sol. In discussing specific strategies she wanted to see throughout the school during language arts time, she recalled that kindergarten teachers brought up the issue of time for play. “Kinder is having a hard time. They’re the ones who are like, ‘Well, what about playing?’ And I’m like, ‘Hmmm, well, playing comes. Yeah, they’re going to play. But during this time, you’re doing ELA and we’re not playing.’ So...they’re the ones who are like, ‘But I really need them to play.’ And I do believe in play. It’s important and I get that. But the reality is right now they’re part of the people who created the deficits, and we need to be on the same page.” Ms. Sanchez was willing to engage in the debate about play time with the kindergarten teachers, but she kept in mind that students were already below grade level by the beginning of second grade at Vista del Sol and took her stance based on the academic deficits in the early grades.

Ms. Sanchez’ desire to be directly involved with how the teaching of literacy occurred in the early grades was at least partially due to the fact that she had seen how many students at the school were already below in the early elementary grades. The prior year had been her first at Vista del Sol. Her observations of the situation indicated that many students were not achieving at adequate levels, and teachers wanted to refer them to SAT without the intervening step of trying to deliver effective literacy instruction to

these struggling readers, themselves. “Right now for example, in second grade, we have a third of the students in SAT. How did that happen? I mean I’m like, ‘You have 40 what? Wait, wait, what happened?’”

She spoke about the types of conversation she was having in her second year with teachers and the shift she was enforcing. Second grade teachers were saying to her, “They’re in second grade and they’re reading at kindergarten level. What do I do? Like we have to put them in SAT.” Rather than immediately referring them to SAT, Ms. Sanchez was now telling them. “Okay, well let’s assume that they didn’t get those reading foundational skills. Let’s not put them in SAT. Let’s do Tier 1 strong instruction, re-teaching and then we’ll go to Tier 2.”

Whereas in her first year, she would allow early grade teachers to immediately refer their students to SAT, now she was trying to build a culture of high expectations for literacy teaching by insisting that teachers deliver effective literacy strategies within their own classrooms. This brought the responsibility for high impact teaching back to the teachers in the general education classroom, whereas before they were able to disavow responsibility by referring the students to SAT. She concluded, “But we need to make sure they’re getting strong Tier 1 instruction. And if I can’t guarantee that, I ethically feel that I can’t even put them into Tier 2, because they were never exposed to what they needed to be exposed to.”

When Ms. Sanchez described her role as a literacy leader, kindergarten factored heavily into her conception. “My role with literacy, that’s a push for the Common Core right now, for college readiness skills, everything that our students are supposed to be

getting since kindergarten. So that's me, as an instructional leader, is about 80% of my job. It's going in, supporting teachers, showing them how to teach reading foundational skills and how to move on from that in order to make sure we're not missing any kids as they go up in the grades. So it's 80% of my job." Ms. Sanchez' approach was to actually demonstrate early literacy strategies in order to ensure that no students were left behind by poor instruction. She considered this kind of direct involvement in the teaching of language arts to be a large majority of her role as principal.

Her vision for high quality reading instruction in kindergarten was that the teachers would focus more on phonemic awareness, believing that teachers oftentimes focused on phonics when students were not yet able to hear and manipulate separate sounds. She did not want to see centers without very specific objectives in the early grades. "Centers are on the backburner as far as I'm concerned at this point. Because we have so many other things we need to do. So if you're going to do centers it should be based on everything you've just covered with them. Not just like, 'Oh, this is so cute. I'm going to color a letter A.'" For Ms. Sanchez, any instructional strategy used during language arts needed to be grounded in research-based best practices, and cuteness did not make the list of factors to be included in that decision.

At Mountainridge, Ms. Martinelli faced the problem that sufficient growth in reading was not being made at the kindergarten level. She invited literacy specialists out to observe the kindergarten classrooms, but the district personnel did not observe any instructional issues that would indicate why students were not making adequate reading progress. At that point, kindergarten teachers began to discuss the issue of developmental

appropriateness. Ms. Martinelli described that these conversations raised anxiety in her. She did not want the idea of developmental appropriateness to become an excuse for teachers to believe that kindergartners could not achieve to a certain level because they were not developmentally ready. Eventually, the issue was partly resolved by having kindergarten teachers engage in district-led Guided Reading Plus (Dorn & Soffos, 2010) training so they could learn more effective strategies for small group instruction.

In addition, Ms. Martinelli realized that kindergarten teachers were keeping students at a particular reading level for too long. At the end of the previous year, she had observed that there was still a sizeable group of kindergarten students who were below grade level even though there was another group that was performing well above grade level. After an analysis of the instructional practices taking place in kindergarten, Ms. Martinelli and the teachers realized that students did not need to stay at a certain DRA level until they had thoroughly mastered a particular concept of print. “So what we saw is that what was happening was that we were actually holding back kids at levels for too long. And so they’d get stuck at 1, but actually at that 1 if they have one-to-one matching, even if they aren’t saying the right words, move them to the 2.”

Of these conversations, Ms. Martinelli stated, “And so that’s how I started this year, and I’m really excited about it. But it was hard, hard. It was really upsetting, and it really challenged people. But it challenged them in a really good way.” Ms. Martinelli was seeking to set a tone of high expectations among teachers for what they expected of students in regard to early literacy. Given the choice between allowing for mediocrity and

confronting the kindergarten teachers on their beliefs about children, Ms. Martinelli opted to have those hard conversations.

Of the push toward higher levels of reading for kindergarten students based on the DRA, Mr. Taylor expressed more ambivalence, especially given the fact that it was a major factor in one teachers' decisions to leave. "My own philosophy is that I think that's probably good, although I think I'm losing a very strong kindergarten teacher this year who is going to go back to ECE because it's just easier. And I really believe in what's developmentally appropriate is that kids will blossom at different ages and that every kid is not going to be a DRA 6." Mr. Taylor went on to explain that he did not think it should be considered the teacher's fault if kindergartners did not meet the DRA level target by the end of the year, because he believed that "kids need 2 to 3 to 4 years to really kind of show where they are." He added that "it's hard because I believe in that, and we really do want those high expectations around like, get moving, get, get moving, right?"

Mr. Correa had already seen a change in philosophy about the daily experience of children in ECE. Before his work as a principal at Cottonwood Elementary School, he had been the director of preschool through second grade. During that time, he observed a change that had taken place: "In our early grades we focus a lot on phonics and phonological awareness- kids practicing letters-sounds, which has been a shift, I think, at our school and probably others where once upon a time there was like the letter of the week, and this week we were going to practice 'M.'" He went on to discuss the fact the ECE program followed the Montessori educational approach. Therefore, students were regularly immersed in activities that were differentiated based on their developmental

level. He also described that ECE students were engaged in guided reading. It seemed that some of the debates about the purpose of ECE had either been resolved at Cottonwood Elementary or had never taken place due to the implementation of a Montessori approach, which incorporated both developmental theories and academic learning.

Issues of developmental appropriateness and the nature of ECE arose as a result of a number of factors. The incoming principals in this study, seeing that their schools had not making adequate yearly growth, focused on early literacy as an important direction for change. District expectations put pressure on principals to make alterations to both ECE and early elementary grade literacy curricula. For those schools that housed an ECE program, principals included these programs in the changing landscape of early literacy and expectations for the daily experiences of young children. Where contentions arose about these changes, principals were willing to have difficult conversations.

### **Family-School Literacy Connections**

Family-school literacy connections did not develop as a strong theme among the participants. This topic of family-school connections generally arose when prompted by an interview question. It was not discussed as a first topic during initial interviews when participants were asked the broader questions of the role as literacy leaders, nor did it arise unless directly asked during second or third interviews.

When the topic was discussed, principals were more inclined to communicate visions of what they would like to see than what was actually occurring with family-school literacy connections. Principals wanted to find more ways to connect and had



some ideas about how this should happen, but they also expressed that it was not as easy to make these ideas into a reality. There were varying ideas as to what these connections should entail.

With the exception of Mr. Taylor, principals tended to focus more on discrete schoolwide events when discussing family-school literacy connections and not on more embedded ways of involving parents through daily interactions with teachers and regular routines such as home reading logs.

One participant did talk about challenging all of the grades at the school to have two parent-school nights, one for literacy and one for mathematics. He described a very engaging literacy night that had recently occurred and spoke about a parent-school liaison who was involved in helping with these events. He also discussed his disappointment when parents did not attend some of these events in the number that he had expected. This disappointment might have been felt even more deeply because he had grown up not far from his school and considered himself to be a member of the community where the school was located.

One participant described the fact that the district actually offered to come out and put on literacy nights, but his school had not had one for a long time. Another participant discussed the difficulty of making these connections when there was so much pressure on schools based on state and district accountability. When asked about making family connections, a principal told me, “We’re not there yet. That’s next year.”

Mr. Schmidt was the only participant who brought up the issue of family-school connections without being directly asked, but it was more in terms of the damaged

perception that Espinar Elementary School had suffered and the steps he was taking to repair the low status of the school. In other words, it was generally not the first topic that participants discussed in relationship to literacy leadership.

Mr. Li, Mr. Correa, and Mr. Taylor mentioned Literacy Nights as a means of connecting with families. Mr. Taylor talked about how the district had certain supports in place for these Literacy Nights. He described these events. “I feel like literacy nights are very, very popular and we had done a few of them in the past. We have definitely not done one in the last two years, but I think that’s an opportunity. The [district] will actually just run a family literacy night for you, where a lot of people come in and talk about how you read with your kid, etc., etc... So I think that it’s very, very cool, and I think that it’s very, very powerful. And I think that it’s something...if you’re running the dream school then this is something that happens a minimum of every two weeks or every month, where you have parents in and you’re instructing parents on how to do this.” Mr. Taylor had taken advantage of the support the district provided to run literacy nights at Bennett Elementary School, but the regularity had dwindled. He expressed that an ideal situation would be to have more of these.

Mr. Li discussed a number of engaging literacy events he wanted to incorporate into the plans for that year, literacy nights among them. Similar to Mr. Taylor’s experience, he cautioned, “But I can say it like it’s the easiest thing in the world. I mean those are the first things to often drop off when people feel like stakes are high on standardized assessments.” Although Mr. Li was new to Carter Elementary School, he

had enough leadership experience in other schools to observe that family connections could easily go by the wayside as other matters took precedence.

Mr. Correa and the Cottonwood staff had recently implemented Literacy Nights. He had challenged all grade levels to conduct one Literacy Night and one Math Night during the school year. He described the fifth-grade Literacy Night as a success, focused on a culturally relevant book the students had read, a Reader's Theater performance put on by the students, and a Mexican meal to which parents contributed. Teachers took the opportunity to provide parents with ideas for home reading. He also discussed that engaging families could be "hit-or-miss."

In relationship to family connections, Ms. Sanchez expressed the reality that the school had a great deal of progress to make in this area. She described the current involvement of parents in the parent-teacher organization (PTO) as one example: "But family being involved here, we have five people on PTO. 900 kids? So we're working on that piece. But I think the family literacy, we're still going to do things throughout the year, but that's going to be next year." In her second year at Vista del Sol, this issue appeared to be a goal for the long-term trajectory of her work at the school. "And family literacy, I think it's going to come. I don't think we're even close right now. I think we have accidentally not meaning to push parents away at our school."

Her focus was more on the habit of blaming parents that had developed at the school and communicating to teachers that such attitudes were not acceptable or productive. "I always hear, 'Well at home they don't have any help.' And you know, our conversation has been, 'You have a circle on influence here. When they're at school,

they're within our circle of influence. When they're at home, they're not within our circle of influence. There's nothing you can do about that. There's nothing I can do about that. So I don't want to hear it anymore. So what are you going to do when they're here with you?" Ms. Sanchez sent a clear message to teachers that they were expected to focus on their locus of control, which was their own classrooms. Faced with deficit messages about parents and families, she re-directed teachers to the factors they could control. "I'm like, 'Guys, if you're kids are not making progress it's your fault.' Reality is, you have a lot of outside factors all the time. You can't worry about them."

At Espinar Elementary School, the community engagement specialist had connected with an outside organization that was planning on donating books to students for the holidays. She made a point of asking Mr. Schmidt whether there were any restrictions on the types of books to be purchased. Mr. Schmidt answered that the only restriction was that the books be something kids like to read. This interchange, which I witnessed while waiting for my first interview with Mr. Schmidt, indicates that a norm had been created at Espinar in which the principal was directly involved with the decision-making about such family-school literacy connections.

Home reading was a family-school literacy connection that Mr. Taylor institutionalized across the board at Bennett Elementary School. In order to maintain accountability for home reading, Mr. Taylor required every teacher to implement a home reading program with some form of family signature that the required reading had occurred. The number of minutes that student read were then entered into a database. In

this way, Mr. Taylor and the teachers could keep track of home reading on a weekly basis.

Mr. Taylor also spoke about exerting influence over teachers to make family-school literacy connections. He noted an exceptional teacher who developed strong relationships with families and described the ways this teacher raised parents' expectations of themselves in regard to their involvement in their child's academic experience. This teacher became a noteworthy example of connecting with families, and Mr. Taylor pointed to this teacher when communicating to other teachers what he would like to see from them in connecting to families around literacy.

### **Literacy Engagement**

Literacy engagement was not a strong theme that came across in the data. Participants generally spoke less about this aspect of literacy leadership and discussed it more narrowly in terms of selecting and checking out library books. There were few discussions about in-class activities that would promote literacy engagement, such as read alouds, sustained silent reading, comprehension activities that support a love of reading, or engaging writing activities.

Principals discussed a desire that students engage in reading for its own sake. Some participants discussed that creating a joy of reading among students was a priority and expressed a desire to engage disengaged readers. In this way, intrinsic motivation to read was an ultimate goal among participants. However, attempts to develop students who were lifelong readers varied a great deal in type and intensity of strategy. Specific examples were sparse in reference to how literacy engagement was promoted.

Mr. Li wanted to establish the idea that reading, as a life practice, should be an expectation for everyone at Carter Elementary School. “I think to just say, as a norm in our school people read, and like that’s important to us, it’s as important to us as the soccer championship or the play or something like that. I think this is also another element about how we build joy.” In creating the norm of reading, Mr. Li believed that this value would translate into joy of reading as part of the school culture. He discussed the fact that there are many purposes to reading, whether it be fiction reading for pure enjoyment or nonfiction reading in order to acquire information. He wanted students to understand the wide variety of reasons to read.

For the purpose of engaging students in reading, Mr. Li spoke about activities he would like to put on at Carter Elementary School, and he believed that teachers would be willing to support these activities. He discussed books and characters that had influenced his own childhood love of reading, and he wanted to influence students to have a similar aesthetic experience of reading. Mr. Li believed that some activities should be offered and not mandated. He wanted students to be able to make choices so that they would develop their own motivation to engage in reading related activities. “And for something to be joyful I think you have to be able to do it even when you’re not required, so again it’s just having an optional lunch book club with the principal for any kids who want to do that.” Some of the activities, Mr. Li suggested, would be purposefully provided as special events that children could choose to occasionally engage in. The lunch book club would reinforce to students the degree to which the leader of the school was engaged in literacy.

Mr. Taylor spoke often about the “joy of reading” and developing a “love of reading” among students. He called himself “a large cheerleader” in his attempts to raise the literacy engagement of students at Bennett Elementary School. Of conversations among staff, he noted, “So we often talk about at our school, um, do kids have a love of reading?” His efforts to increase expectations for student achievement was intricately tied to his belief that students needed a great deal of reading practice in order to make progress. “I mean a kid who has practiced 10 hours and a kid who had practiced 100 hours, there’s a big difference. So part of this is me going around celebrating kids and trying to motivate kids extrinsically, which again - but all the same if kids get a little bracelet or the necklace or the whatever. Then the goal is if I’m sitting across from you and I know that you’ve actually read 125 hours at your independent reading level, I can eliminate that volume or practice is the issue, and I can move to this next lever.”

Mr. Taylor alluded to the fact that the extrinsic rewards he presented should not be the end-goal, but were meant to be a means of increasing the intrinsic motivation of children to read. An important conception behind Mr. Taylor’s strategy was to be able to get students to read enough so that reading practice could be eliminated as a factor if students were struggling as readers. In other words, school personnel would be better able to ascertain the true issues of a struggling reader if they knew that the student had been practicing reading enough and that a lack of practice was not the issue.

On the opposite end of the spectrum on philosophies about reading engagement, Ms. Sanchez was less inclined to want recreational reading to be included as homework. She focused solely on the ultimate goal that she wanted students to be intrinsically

motivated to read. An important aspect of the new curricular program at Vista del Sol was the fact that it included engaging and authentic children's literature.

**Book Circulation.** Some principals focused on the concrete aspects of literacy engagement such as the school library, classroom libraries, and book circulation in their discussions about literacy engagement. The library at Carter Elementary School, where Mr. Li worked, serves to underscore the situation that many principals in high-need schools find themselves in. The library had titles that were largely outdated. This means that multicultural books are scant, given the more recent trend toward inclusion of diverse representations in children's books. There is oftentimes not a full-time librarian to take on the central role of updating the library and sometimes the school has not had a librarian in place for many years prior to a new principal's arrival. Mr. Li described, "So I would argue that the library that we had at that time- just a body of text that were included- were already very, very poor. And then what happened is we converted that library space into some other kind of instructional space. And so then the library just kind of had to find different homes throughout our building, and we have yet to have someone really own getting books and kids' hands. That is not a position that we have at our school. And no one has yet been able to say like, 'Yes, I'll take that on and do that.'" Hence, the entire system is in disarray, leaving principals with a massive undertaking to revive the school library, sometimes with few resources, but more oftentimes without even the personnel to take it on.

Mr. Schmidt also discussed the school library in terms of reading engagement. One of the positive aspects of being a turnaround school, he said, was the large amount of



funds that had come with the status. He described their efforts to revamp the school library. “We had to do a big purge of our library and just trying to get better books- books kids want to read. So she's been a big support with that. The library was just antiquated, and it was just interesting to do kind of an audit and see how many books hadn't been checked out in 10, 15, 20 years...And then also we needed a lot more nonfiction so we spent a lot of money on books- not just our regular library, but our classroom libraries.” Both the school library and the classroom libraries became a focus for ensuring that students had reading materials at hand that would actually engage them. Mr. Schmidt summarized the situation he wanted to avoid. “We've got plenty of challenges, and we don't want them going over to fill up their book bag and struggling, because there's just no books they want to read.”

Mr. Correa chose to increase the number of books available for student engagement through the purchase of a technology application that provided a large selection of books. Aware that there were students below grade level in reading, this program enabled students to read on tablets, thus creating a realm of anonymity to the books each child read within the classroom. Hence, one demotivating factor—student avoidance of reading books that were not at grade level in front of peers—was eliminated.

Ms. Sanchez was working to include the school librarian at Vista del Sol in the academic focus of the school. “We made it part of our rotation with specials, so they have to go into library as a class. But the problem that we had last year was, you know, checking out books, coloring book marks. Well, this year with the backwards design, our

librarian will be aligning what she's doing with what they're covering in Engaged Literacy. So it's not exactly Engaged Literacy, but what they're doing is what she will be working off of, so if they're doing kindergarten, they're doing beginning, middle, and end of the story, then when she does her read aloud that's going to be her focus."

Ms. Sanchez went on to explain that she had included the librarian on the school technology system so that "she's able to pull up their backwards planning for every grade level, and she has to incorporate it into her lesson." In this way, the students at Vista del Sol were provided with a regular system for book circulation and engaging read alouds during library time. As well, teachers' lessons were reinforced by expecting the school librarian to target important oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension into the read aloud.

Whereas many high-need schools divest of the school librarian as an expendable employee, because of the historic situation in which the work of the school librarian is siloed, Ms. Sanchez incorporated this employee into the academic literacy pursuits of the entire school. This created a situation where the librarian could reinforce the lessons of teachers as well as providing the other services that are so important for literacy engagement, such as checking out books that can inspire children and from which they can learn.

### **Concluding Remarks**

A cross-case analysis highlights some of the essential similarities and difference in principals' perceptions of their role as literacy leaders. The ways that participants demonstrated their underlying beliefs and perceptions about literacy education and

leadership was highly influenced by the school context and district in which each principal worked. However, based on common characteristics of high-need schools, many commonalities surfaced.

Upon being hired at their school site, participants set about the work of improving the literacy achievement by raising expectations. Creating a culture of high achievement in literacy meant raising expectations for how teachers taught. Participants, therefore, looked to literacy curricula as a high leverage point that could create sweeping reform of literacy instruction, if followed with a degree of fidelity. In the effort to increase the effectiveness of literacy instruction, participants also sought ongoing professional development for teachers. Participants also perceived that senior team leads- a new position created by the district- were fulfilling an important gap, that of ongoing coaching for teachers. They saw this as a positive change.

A culture of high achievement was also directed at students through principals' efforts to increase reading enjoyment opportunities and recognize students for literacy achievement. Principals sought to provide students with opportunities for increased learning through individual and small group literacy interventions. These student interventions oftentimes took the form of a high-level operation with many adults tutoring throughout the day.

For most participants, distributed leadership offered a structure through which they could engage educational professionals at their school in constructive dialogue for the purpose of creating ongoing improvement to student achievement in literacy. This structure provided them with opportunities to learn from others based on collaborative

work. Data team meetings also brought educational staff together to analyze student work and assessments in an effort to continually monitor the progress of students and generate ways to improve their literacy achievement.

Faced with the many demands on their time, most participants still saw literacy achievement as a central focus of their work. As principals in high-need schools, most participants perceived that they had an important role to play in directing literacy achievement efforts. All principals brought energy and involvement to the enterprise of literacy achievement at their sites. They implemented policies and systems to create school-wide literacy programs that could continue to be changed and improved upon through critical analysis of evidence in the form of student data.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of principals as they envision their role as literacy leaders and act out this role in high-need elementary schools. This study was designed to answer the research questions:

How do principals of high-need elementary schools perceive their role as a literacy leader?

How do principals of high-need elementary schools describe their actions to improve literacy learning?

The findings of this study indicate that there are commonalities to the perceptions of principals in regard to their understanding of literacy leadership. The findings also indicate that there are commonalities to the ways that principals carry out literacy reform efforts in high-need elementary schools.

Within these commonalities there were nuanced differences between participants as they sought to effect changes to the literacy achievement of the students in their charge. These differences reflected the perceptions and leadership styles of the participants as they worked within their own unique context. These differences also reflected the literacy philosophy and pedagogical understandings of the participants based on their personal experiences with literacy and their professional experiences with teaching language arts.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 discussed some of the variances between participants. Chapter 6 will focus almost exclusively on similarities in an effort to highlight patterns that can be of use to the research on literacy leadership. This chapter will embed the individual case studies and cross-case analysis within the context of the research literature on leading for educational reform and building literacy instructional capacity. This body of research is extensive, but Leithwood et al. (2004) have distilled the research on this topic into a “common set of ‘basic’ leadership practices used by successful leaders in most circumstances” (p. 2). Therefore, the framework of this chapter will be grounded in the three sets of basic practices Leithwood et al. (2004) describe as necessary for successful leadership in schools: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

### **Setting Direction**

Effective instructional leaders inspire and sustain a shared vision (Leithwood et al., 2004). This vision puts student learning at the center (Fullan, 2007; Marzano et al., 2005; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). The importance of the principal in developing a shared vision and raising expectations for all students has been well documented (Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Chance & Segura, 2009; Graczewski et al., 2009; Grissom, 2011; Jacobson et al., 2007; Ovando & Cavazos, 2004; Portin et al., 2009; Theoharis, 2010; Youngs & King, 2002). Principals who play a key role in valuing literacy efforts are effective in spreading that sense of value to the rest of the school staff. Specific to literacy, high-performing principals established trust with staff to encourage a collective school vision of literacy achievement (Fletcher et al., 2011).

Participants in this study perceived themselves to be responsible for developing a shared vision of literacy at their schools, and they commonly spoke about the vision in terms of raising expectations for educational staff and students. Expectations for teachers included their instructional practices and their conceptions about the levels of literacy development students could reach at any given grade level. Principals expected teachers to share a vision of high expectations for their own teaching and for student achievement. Three of the six principals described instances when they directly challenged staff attitudes that did not align with this vision. In all three cases, these staff attitudes were preconceived notions that limited the sense of what students could achieve. In addition to expecting teachers to participate in a vision of high expectations for students, principals also perceived their role to be directly responsible for developing and communicating a literacy vision to students.

### **Student Literacy Engagement**

Whereas principals were not directly delivering classroom instruction and so had what could be considered a secondary influence over instruction, student literacy engagement was an area that they could directly influence through principal-student interactions. Some principals in this study discussed using verbal messages, rituals such as assemblies, and incentives such as awards or rewards to make direct inroads into the literacy engagement of students. Mr. Taylor exemplified the direct approach to student literacy engagement through his ritual of going to every classroom in the school every Friday morning in order to hand out awards for home reading minutes and personally give students recognition in front of their classes.

Some participants sought to influence reading engagement through the school library and classroom libraries. They discussed the condition of the school libraries as they came into their positions in high-need schools, the antiquated books and computers. Mr. Li, whose experiences at libraries had been so important in shaping his own love of reading, was in the midst of trying to find a location where the school could house the meager collection of books that were left after they had sorted through all of the outdated titles and unpopular works. Mr. Schmidt discussed sorting through books that had not been checked out for years and spending considerable amounts of school funds in order to acquire books students would actually read. Mr. Correa discussed the importance of purchasing a schoolwide app that could be used to give students an abundance of book choices. An important consideration for principals was to match kids with books they would actually read.

Because of the issues with school libraries described by principals in high-need schools, I believe it is important for districts to reconsider the importance of school librarians. These individuals, if used correctly, not only support students to be engaged in literacy, but can also support the principal and entire staff in their efforts to increase literacy achievement. In one of the states where this study occurred, the state department had recently made a change from an endorsement as a school librarian to an endorsement as a teacher librarian. The teacher librarian focused to a much greater extent on the role of the librarian as an integrated member of the educational staff focused on the academic scope and sequence at the school. This change in the role of school librarians supports



systems that make this role more integrated within schools so that they are not considered expendable.

### **Early Literacy**

Participant interviews focused on the shifting paradigm of ECE as an area where they needed to set a new direction or cast a new vision. Some principals were faced with a situation where they differed on philosophies with ECE teachers about the place of early literacy in the curriculum. Participant philosophies were partially impacted by raised district expectations and pressures for higher kindergarten and first-grade reading levels, causing principals to feel a need to reach back toward ECE for earlier literacy instruction. In these conversations, ECE teachers challenged the developmental appropriateness of certain types of literacy infusions in the ECE curriculum and contended that it was taking time away from play. Participants both understood the stance of ECE teachers and the stance of the district on early literacy. However, when it came to making changes to ECE, they made it clear that they expected to see more literacy instruction infused in the curriculum. Principals were also willing to challenge expectations for the early elementary grades, where literacy was accepted as a part of the curriculum but where the district was increasing the expectations.

### **Literacy Curricula**

Effective instructional leaders communicate their vision through concrete illustrations of quality instruction and clear expectations for how to meet quality markers. They also maintain this vision consistently across classrooms (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). Based on the major discrepancies Reeves (2008) found between principals'

perceptions of the time spent on reading instruction and the reality in classrooms, the author challenged school leaders to provide leadership that produces curricular consistency across the school and define what good teaching of reading means. For the participants of this study, the adoption of literacy curricula was perceived as a concrete and relatively easily achieved depiction of quality literacy instruction. It also served to meet the challenges set out by Reeves (2008).

Principals reported adopting literacy curricula within the first years of their tenure at their current school. They viewed the adoption of literacy curricula as a high-leverage move, but they also discussed the limitations of it as a panacea for long-term instructional transformation. It appeared that participants used the literacy curricula as a stop-gap measure to effect instructional change in contexts that seemed overwhelming. Curriculum adoptions were perceived to be an initial positive step in the direction of creating a consistent vision for quality literacy practices.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation study included a quote from Allington (2002) on the adoption of literacy curricula:

But it is the absence of expertise— let’s call it naiveté— that leads teachers and administrators to hope upon hope that a new reading series or new intervention program will solve all their woes. It is a sad day when school administrators flaunt their limited expertise about teaching— their naiveté— and publicly announce the purchase of a “proven program.” (p. 17)

Contrary to Allington’s statement, participant interviews from this dissertation study indicate that they did not believe a literacy program would solve all of their woes in regard to effective literacy instruction. In contrast, they were putting faith in the program to solve *some* of their woes. The adoption of a literacy program also did not correlate

with principal knowledge about literacy instruction or “limited expertise about teaching” (Allington, 2002). One principal in the study did indicate that he felt inadequate in his knowledge of literacy instruction and had purchased a program partially for that reason. However, the reading specialist of the study, Ms. Sanchez, had also adopted a program and was adamant about its promise as one step in her multi-faceted approach to improved literacy achievement.

I found that principals, with the exception of one, had a measured assessment of the extent to which curricula would solve their issues and were relatively circumspect about its influence on literacy instruction. None of the principals spoke of curriculum adoption as the only measure they took to improve literacy instruction. In other words, there were nuanced reasons for curriculum adoptions.

**Curriculum fidelity and teacher attrition.** Although often with a hint of apology for their stance, principals expressed that they wanted teachers to initially follow the curriculum with a fairly high degree of fidelity. After tighter implementation, teachers would be allowed to stray from the curriculum for plausible reasons, such as an individual’s proven record of effective instruction or general consensus that the curriculum did not have the right balance of important literacy components.

Participants did not see fidelity to the curriculum as their end goal. Rather, the end goal was to build the instructional capacity of the teachers at their sites so that they could eventually make wise choices about how to teach with the curriculum and other resources. However, a key reality is that many high-need schools had experienced a great deal of teacher attrition. A number of participants alluded to this, and Mr. Li explicitly

mentioned it in the context of PD. “And in some ways you work so hard to develop a teacher for a year and you just find that turnover at the school or turnover in this work or whatnot just happened so quickly that you hope a critical mass of people stay at the school, so you don't have to start at the same place next year.”

For most participants, it seemed there was an unspoken hope that the teaching staff would remain intact “from here on out,” that they might create a stable teaching body. To some extent, some participants had done that over the years, but they still discussed a fair amount of new teachers being hired each year. And the realities, especially of high-need and turnaround schools, is that teachers do not commonly stay at the site for more than a few years (Karp, 2014; Payne, 2008).

Based on the assumption of a cohesive, long-term teaching staff, participants made comments indicating that over the trajectory of a number of years, they would like to see the implementation of the literacy program become looser or they would be able to make necessary changes as teachers gained a great understanding of it. But if teachers do not stay, it raises the question as to whether these schools can ever move out of tight curricular implementation, a policy that may neglect the ability of teachers to make professional, day-to-day decisions that best meet the needs of their particular students in literacy.

**Published versus enacted curriculum.** In the overall discussion with the participants about curricular implementation, an important missing factor in the push toward some form of fidelity to literacy programs was the way that expectation was then reinforced in classrooms. When I directly asked Ms. Martinelli about how she was able to

ensure that the curriculum was enacted with a teaching staff that she described as consistently challenging, she stated that much of her information came from discussions in data team meetings and not from direct observations in classrooms. “Most of that is coming up in data teams a lot. I think that it’s a challenge to be consistently in the classrooms enough to really to really follow up with that. And especially with a school this size. It’s over 700. It’s like two small elementary schools. So that is challenging. We do have the observation feedback and we do get into classrooms, but not as much as we really need to in order to know and feel confident that it is always translating into classroom practice.” Time was clearly a factor in Ms. Martinelli’s ability to be strongly in touch with literacy instruction as it was actually enacted at Mountainridge. Another factor was the sheer size of this elementary school.

In some ways Mr. Taylor and Ms. Sanchez fell on the opposite end of the continuum in terms of following through to see how teachers were actually using the program. Mr. Taylor had been adamant that the new literacy program be implemented with fidelity. However, when it came to the literacy program he stated, “I cannot think of a time when I’ve seen someone do some reading instruction then me say, ‘Oh, what you’d really need to be doing is, I can tell that you’re not even starting to point at the words. You’re not doing this,’ and give some feedback around direct reading instruction.” Mr. Taylor’s intentions were that teachers follow the curriculum with fidelity, but he did not feel capable of understanding what that would look like or providing pointers on how instruction could be improved.

On the other hand, Ms. Sanchez described spending the summer in order to familiarize herself with the new program and attending all district-led PD related to it as the school year progressed. She discussed going into classrooms regularly to make assessments of the extent to which teachers were implementing the program. Despite her stance on fidelity, she recounted that she was praising teachers for both using the program and making it their own through teacher-created presentations that made the program more interactive.

Most participants tended to not make important distinctions between the intended (written, published) curriculum and the enacted (taught) curriculum, nor did they generally mention observing in classrooms specifically to make assessments of whether the curriculum was being enacted as intended. Principals appeared to assume that fidelity to the curriculum was in place and that this fidelity would equate with consistent teaching across a team of grade level teachers. It is also possible that principals, in distributed leadership schools, assumed or knew that senior team leads were working with teachers to implement the curriculum with consistency across grade level teams. This, after all, was one of the identified jobs of that position. And this would also account for why the one participant, Ms. Sanchez, was most closely following the actual implementation of the new literacy program in classrooms.

### **Developing People**

Developing the capacity of educators is an important consideration for effective leaders. Pedagogical knowledge is foundational to strong instructional practices, and teachers are obviously the main agents through which students are guided in their

learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). In addition to a continual focus on student learning, principal characteristics that have been linked to higher academic achievement are a high value for teacher learning and an emphasis on staff development particular to the needs of teachers (Dinham, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003; Quint et al., 2007; Sebring & Bryk, 2000).

### **Professional Development**

Instructional leaders in effective urban schools took the stance that the larger environment was a “source of opportunities, resources, and potentially helpful ideas, rather than a site of roadblocks, unhelpful advice, and unreachable requirements” (Portin et al, 2009). The principals in this study certainly took this attitude toward the PD that was offered through various avenues. They discussed literacy-related PD opportunities for teachers led by a variety of sources: curriculum publisher; district; school-based instructional dean or coach; teacher within the school; and principal. They sought to build the instructional capacity of teachers in literacy through all of these forms of PD.

Most PD focused directly on programs and models currently in place at schools. It targeted practices teachers could use directly in their classrooms. There was not an emphasis on PD that was more philosophical or theoretical in nature, but it is possible that the PD teachers attended included a component that covered underlying theory about reading pedagogy and linked this back to instructional practices.

**District influence on PD choices.** Coburn (2005) found that principals’ philosophical beliefs about literacy instruction influenced the choice of policy messages they brought back to schools from the district and, consequently, impacted the PD

opportunities to which teachers were exposed. My interviews with principals did not indicate this to be the case. Rather, the principals in this study were heavily influenced by the current district foci. And the current district foci often aligned with a particular literacy program. Mr. Li pointed this out specifically in regard to high-need schools. “I think, given the expectation of some level of uniformity and also some level of quick turnaround in terms of achievement scores and levels, that literacy help often comes part and parcel with adherence to a specific program.” Beyond PD that focused on a specific program, principals were more than willing to encourage teachers and other educational personnel to attend any literacy-related PD the district had to offer. Their main goal was to expose teachers to anything that would add to teacher’s knowledge base about literacy instruction.

A reason for this difference between the findings from the Coburn study (2005) and my own analysis may be based on the difference between the times and even places of the study. Some principals in my study spoke of various philosophies, such as whole language or phonics-based instruction, but it seemed as though they saw these philosophies as falling along a trajectory of accumulated knowledge about literacy instruction rather than as opposing concepts about how to teach literacy. On the other hand, the research of Coburn (2005) occurred not long after major shifts had been made to literacy instruction. The principals in the Coburn study (2005) saw certain philosophies as being opposed to one another. In addition, the location of the Coburn study (2005) was California, which had at the time of the study experienced a transition from whole language to heavily scripted programs in high-need schools. These factors may account



for the strong stance the principals in the Coburn study (2005) took on reading philosophies and the diminished influence literacy philosophy had on principals in my study.

One last factor that may account for difference between my dissertation study and the Coburn study (2005) is the issue of district trust. The participants in my study generally expressed trust for the types of literacy PD being offered through the district. They spoke highly, for instance, of Guided Reading Plus (Dorn & Soffos, 2010) training, which was being offered through the district. Coburn's account (2005) presented greater distrust and disharmony between the district and principals.

In reflecting on the discrepancies I found between these studies, a lack of discernment about what teachers attend in terms of PD puts the emphasis of philosophies enacted at a school site largely in the hands of districts and publishing companies. In reality, the literacy philosophies that have been enacted in classrooms within the last few decades actually do have substantive differences. Whole language teaching and phonics-based instruction, for instance, are not the same thing. They are not merely points of development in pedagogical understanding along a continuum. Teachers only have a certain amount of time in the day to teach literacy. This means that important choices must be made. It is possible, to use the example of whole language versus phonics, that teachers may need to make a choice between the phonics lesson and the writer's workshop time in the course of one literacy period. Such situations highlight the fact that philosophical understandings do impact what actually happens in classrooms and, just as importantly, what does not happen in classrooms.

Based on Coburn's study (2005), the one principal who had a very strong background in literacy pedagogy as a reading specialist, Ms. Sanchez, would logically have been the one principal to filter what teachers were exposed to in terms of district PD. This was not the case. She was, in fact, attending all of the district PD sessions for the new curriculum. The district had set it up so that principals were supposed to attend just the ending of the PD for the new literacy program. Ms. Sanchez made the decision to attend all of the PD each month. She explained her reason for this decision. "So we are like, well, this sounds great but this is where we are. So this is what we need to do so we can make it our own based on our needs... So we're able to hear everything and just kind of take the pieces and kind of lead the implementation team to where we need them to be. We're like, oh but how about this? What about this?" Rather than keep staff from attending the PD, Ms. Sanchez' stance was to attend in order to know exactly what was presented by the educational publishing company. She could then analyze that message against what she believe the school needed and exercise influence over the ways the program was being enacted.

To summarize, reflecting on the difference between the findings of the Coburn study (2005) and my dissertation study served to highlight an important distinction that has significance for the principal's role in the direction the school takes in literacy instruction. My participants did not appear to filter PD with the exception of Ms. Sanchez, who attended all PD and then interpreted the message to teachers afterward. By not filtering PD, principals may be divesting of an important aspect of their vision for

what literacy instruction will look like at their schools and what philosophies will be enacted.

**Principal participation in PD.** Research supports the importance of principal participation in PD; instructional leadership is a key factor in positive outcomes related to PD (Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Graczewski et al., 2009; Sanzo et al., 2011; Youngs & King, 2002). Specifically in literacy education, reading gains are associated with principals who seek out high-quality literacy PD and engage directly in professional discussions about literacy instruction with education staff. These effective principals use PD as an opportunity to develop communities of practice where critical thinking and problem solving about issues of literacy instruction are a norm (Fletcher et al., 2011).

A number of the study participants discussed the importance of attending PD alongside the educational staff, even given the demands on their time and the multitude of other tasks awaiting them. With the exception of the one principal who spoke about being a thought partner with teachers during PD and opting out of principal PD in order to attend literacy-related teacher PD as a means of building his own instructional capacity, none of the other principals elaborated on their involvement to the extent described in the study conducted by Fletcher et al. (2011). Ms. Sanchez, however, took opportunities after the district PD to lead discussions about the content of PD. Other participants told accounts of being involved in this kind of critical thinking and problem solving during data team meetings, which will be covered in a different section.

## **Senior Team Leads**

Lewis-Specter and Jay highlight the changing role of reading specialists and literacy coaches in schools, including “including rising expectations for reading specialists to influence not only individual students and teachers, but also school-wide reading performance and programming” (2011, p. 9). Principals who were in schools with distributed leadership models highlighted a new district-created position called “senior team leads.” Participants appeared to find this role filled another need for developing people, that of coaching. The role of these individuals was to provide ongoing feedback to teachers by working directly in their classrooms. Senior team leads spent the other half of the day teaching in their own classrooms.

Most principals respected senior team leads as teachers who had proven their effectiveness through the district and state teacher evaluation frameworks, being deemed highly effective. They relied on this new role to give the ongoing coaching that they did not have the time and/or expertise to give to teachers. In addition, because the senior team leads were distributed based on their own grade level expertise, principals perceived that these individuals could better address the specific developmental issues that teachers faced, especially those issues that principals did not feel adequate to address if they had not actually taught in those grades.

**Coaching teachers.** Elmore (2004) highlights the importance of context in making instructional changes and underscores the fact that teachers most effectively learn to make changes in “the setting in which they work” (p. 3). Coaching has demonstrable positive results on literacy instruction and student achievement (Assel, Landry, Swank, &

Gunnewig, 2007; Hsieh, Hemmeter, McCollum, & Ostrosky, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lonigan, Farver, Phillips, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2011; McCollum, Hemmeter, & Hsieh, 2011 NCRFTA, 2005; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010).

Interviews with principals indicated that they felt relieved by the addition of this new role to their instructional leadership teams. They recognized that PD alone was not enough to effect deep and lasting changes, nor was the adoption of a literacy program. Although these team leads were just beginning their work, principals believed the role was already providing a crucial link between PD, the curriculum, and daily classrooms practices of individual teachers.

The focus on senior team leads during my interviews with particular principals indicates the extent to which they understood the depth of expertise teachers need in order to effectively teach literacy. As is the case in many turnaround schools, there was a relatively large number of newer teachers. Principals understood the time it would take for them to put the pieces together in order to construct the networks of associations required to teach literacy instruction with a particular groups of students at a particular grade level. Principals considered the work of senior team leads as one means of accelerating this process. Specifically in the case of Ms. Sanchez' school, where there were no team leads, she took on this role directly to some extent.

**Relationship of principals and senior team leads.** Matsumura et al. (2009) found significant correlations between increased involvement of teachers with the reading coach and principals who treated the reading coach as a valued professional. Distant relationships between principals and literacy coaches can send a message to teachers that

literacy instruction is a low priority (Kral, 2012). Survey results from a study conducted Selvaggi (2016) found that principals identified the collaborative relationship between the literacy coach and themselves as very important.

For those schools with senior team leads, principals discussed the inclusion of this new position in the instructional leadership team, along with the assistant principals and instructional deans. Participants described regular discussions with these individuals. In one case, Mr. Schmidt was experiencing difficulty with the ECE teaching staff. He took the opportunity to conduct co-observations with the senior team lead who had the ECE case load. This not only helped to create a bridge of communication for the principal, but also demonstrated to teachers that the principal considered the senior team lead to be a collaborative partner. In this way, the senior team lead also appeared to provide a supportive partner to the work of principals in moving veteran teachers in the direction of needed change. It may be the case that the vision of principals is sometimes resisted if teachers do not know exactly how to go about meeting the changing expectations and if principals are not sure of the specific ways to meet those expectations themselves. Senior team leads may, as in the case of the ECE staff, provide the concrete steps teachers need to take, thus lowering teacher resistance to the message of a principal and increasing the likelihood that the vision will be enacted in a concrete way in the classroom, especially if it is coupled with collaborative efforts that bring all parties together through the process of observation and feedback.

## **Redesigning the Organization**

Effective principals purposefully create organizational structures and systems that support educational professionals within the school to work together for the goal of consistently improved learning conditions for students. Leithwood et al. (2004) include in this set of basic practices such activities as “modifying organizational structures and building collaborative processes” in order to “facilitate the work of organizational members” (2004, p. 7). Effective leaders also recognize the importance of flexibility in organizational structures to meet the complexities of each situation (Schmoker, 2004) and the changing agenda for school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004).

The districts in which principals worked played a major role in the nature and types of leadership structures or processes that participants experienced at their site. Two structures or processes that stood out in my interviews with principals, as supporting their work as lead agents of change, were distributed leadership models and data use. These two systems created a network of formal and informal educational leaders with whom principals could collaborate on a regular basis. The structures, where used with intent, also provided increased spaces for dialogic inquiry with the goal of improved literacy instruction.

A number of principals also spoke about their own efforts to redesign the RTI model at their schools, improve its functioning, or create an RTI model where none essentially existed. Because of the large numbers of students who were below grade level in literacy, commonly far below grade level, principals faced school situations where there was a desperate need to raise the effectiveness of Tier 1 instruction. As discussed in

previous sections, principals sought to accomplish this through combinations of vision sharing, expectation raising, curriculum adoption, PD, and embedded coaching through senior team leads. However, even if all Tier 1 instruction was to become highly effective immediately, there were still large numbers of students in the upper grades who needed to make rapid progress in order to meet grade level literacy standards. Therefore, principals also focused their efforts on Tier 2 instruction and worked to better define Tier 3 instruction. For Tier 2 instruction, principals sought to create systems of student interventions that would add extra support for rapid literacy growth.

### **Distributed Leadership**

The status of the school as “turnaround” impacted the structure, with districts organizing turnaround schools under a distributed leadership model. Hence, in this section, I will not focus on how particular principals in turnaround schools created distributed leadership but their perceptions about it and their interactions within a model that was already structured for them.

Leithwood et al. (2004) warns that the term “distributed leadership” is “is in danger of becoming no more than a slogan unless it is given more thorough and thoughtful consideration” (p. 5). Harris and Spillane (2008) suggest that the focus of distributed leadership should be on interactions and not actions. In this way, the term is less likely to be misrepresented as a way to distribute work in order to create silos of responsibility.

Three of the four principals in this study, who worked through distributed leadership, made use of it in such a way that it created cross-pollination of ideas in a non-



hierarchical set of interactions between educational professionals in varying roles. Mr. Schmidt made a remark that serves to exemplify the way distributed leadership was working as most schools. “And so really what I’ve noticed is processes we’re all pushing on each other to get stronger and we’re all building instructional capacity in one another.” One principal, perhaps, embodied more the slogan of distributed leadership in that he communicated a greater sense of divesting of instructional leadership by handing it off to other educational professionals and did not report taking advantage of the opportunity to use the structure to create systemic processes at the school, such as dialogic inquiry between professionals as a means of increasing student learning.

**Instructional leadership teams.** Instructional leadership teams (ILT) played a major role in the distributed leadership model. Principals spoke of the individual conversations they had with members of the ILT and how the ILT engaged as a group in discussing their efforts toward the overall goal of improved literacy achievement. Principals considered the individuals that made up the ILT to be thought partners with whom they could reflect and debrief on a consistent basis about teachers, students, and literacy instruction. Most principals took advantage of the collaborative opportunities with the ILT by setting up regular meetings with them.

Where ILTs did not exist, principals appeared to feel more isolated by the demands of the role and especially the responsibilities of working with teachers directly to move them toward increasingly effective literacy instruction. Most principals within distributed leadership used the opportunity to learn from ILT members, including senior team leads. They also made use of ILT members in order to bridge potential

disagreements with teachers and gain legitimacy as educational leaders through collaborative observations of teachers with ILT members.

With the exception of one principal, participants reported using distributed leadership to create dialogic spaces with the ILT and teachers for the purpose of figuring out how to continue to increase the effectiveness of literacy instruction. The one principal who did not participate in this kind of consistent dialogue served to highlight the difference between distributing and divesting. Leithwood et al. (2004) warn that “practical applications of leadership distribution may easily get confounded with the mere distribution of management responsibilities” (p. 4). It appears that this was the case for this particular individual. This participant did, however, appear to be in the initial phases of using data team meetings in the early grades as a means of having important conversations about raising student literacy achievement. Hence, data team meetings became a forum through which he could directly work with teachers to create a dialogic space focused on improved student learning.

The distributed leadership model, newly embedded within some schools, provided a practical system of ongoing observation, feedback, and support for teachers. For those who used the model to focus on dialogic inquiry about how to continually build instructional capacity, it also provided an avenue through which principals were able to continue to grow in their understanding of literacy pedagogy and practice.

### **Data Use**

Effective schools have systems in place to track academic progress and make adjustments to instruction based on an analysis of data (Knapp et al., 2010). Instructional

leaders focus on the evidence afforded through data to communicate the achievement at their school sites (Knapp et al., 2010) They are able to translate district and state accountability systems into a system that is owned by the school to continuously monitor progress of students and inform instructional practice (Portin et al., 2009). Regularly scheduled data team meetings provide a forum through which school staff can collaborate to use data for improving student learning (Portin et al., 2009).

Regular data use was in place in most schools, and principals often referred to data in their discussions about literacy achievement at their schools. A number of participants spoke of displays of data as a “wake-up call” to teachers in high-need schools. Ms. Martinelli, perhaps, best exemplified letting data speak for itself, as she tacked up posters of the previous year’s achievement results for teachers to gaze at on her first day with them. She reported that, by the end of the data walk, the teachers had all figured out that the students were not doing as well as they thought they were; in fact, the teachers realized that the students were actually not doing well, at all.

Some principals reported having a designated data room where regular meetings took place to bring data and analyze it. During data sessions, educational staff came together to look closely at what the data indicated about the progress of students and what the next steps would be to propel students forward in their literacy development. Participants reported being highly involved in these meetings. They worked to rearrange school schedules so that all the teachers from a particular grade level could meet together regularly. They attended data team meetings and collaborated with grade level teams of

teachers. They used their observations from these meetings to reflect with the ILT and develop future plans.

Mr. Correa was a strong example of someone who had been able to translate the state and district systems of accountability into a staff-owned data analysis system in literacy. He spoke at length during our first interview about all of the changing literacy assessments, what exactly they measured, how he was working with his ILT to figure out how each measure should be used, why he had dropped a particular assessment system, and how student generated work samples fit into the entire picture. He also recounted how teachers had asked him whether they still needed to conduct informal reading assessments, because they were no longer required at the district level. He brought them back to the purpose of data, which is to improve instruction, and told them they did indeed need to continue to conduct informal assessments for their own progress monitoring of students. In this way, he helped them to understand the difference between using data for continually reflective practice and mere district compliance.

Ms. Sanchez was one participant who was not in a district that had developed data team meetings. She described the one data team meeting that had included teachers as more of an event occurring once a semester when district leaders would come to the school and lead it. In contrast, the other participants discussed data team meetings as an integral part of their professional processes, occurring weekly. Ms. Sanchez also described that the district had decided what data would be analyzed for their district-led data team meeting. In contrast, principals in district-focused data schools had been directed by the district leaders to let teachers figure out sources of data to add to the body

of evidence they used. This evidence was not only standardized achievement results but also informal reading assessments, writing samples, and other student work. The district had clearly played a crucial role in guiding principals to allow teachers ownership over essential aspects of the data team process.

The juxtaposition of participants from two districts served to highlight the important role one district was making in supporting principals to develop school-wide data systems that actually focused on impacting student learning rather than just accountability. Systems of data collection and analysis became even more important in these high-need schools where principals had been hired to make school-wide changes to improve student learning. Using data to show teachers the reality of student achievement provided the catalyst to leverage wide-scale changes to literacy instruction in many of these schools.

Mr. Li highlighted the importance of the data process for teacher learning. He referred to single versus double-loop learning. “And I think there's a concept that I really like, I don't know that I'm always great at facilitating it, but I learned about this concept of double-loop learning. And it's like, this first loop of learning is just learning about the content. And so it might be this prompt or this passage. But a facilitator and a strong team really needs to take a moment at the end and say like, ‘What’s the other loop?’ which is how are we learning about our learning process. And being able to talk with a team and say, ‘You know we've done this data cycle now for a couple of times. Like let's look back over the last month. What have we realized about our process, our learning, our instruction?’”

Mr. Schmidt described the same concept as Mr. Li in terms of building instructional capacity. “But throughout all these processes what we're doing is we're really building capacity in teachers to just have these thought processes on their own as they just look at their data and work with their kids, especially in small reading groups, but then also just have a finger on the pulse of where their kids are with respect to their literacy skills.” Although the other participants did not discuss this sort of double-loop learning as explicitly as Mr. Li and Mr. Schmidt, they recounted scenarios that showed the ways in which data was being used in teams in order to create an analytical model that incorporated evidence for the purpose of reflection on the effectiveness of literacy practices.

### **Restructuring Response to Intervention**

Many of the participants in this study were faced with very high numbers of students below grade level in literacy. Tier 1 instruction was a main focus of reform for these participants, but they also saw a need to target Tier 2 instruction in an effort to provide lower-performing students with extensive support and multiple opportunities to learn material in order to catch up to their grade level.

A number of participants spoke about the many student supports in place at their schools and the need to coordinate these supports. Some principals appeared to have a well-developed system to coordinate all of the many interventions that were taking place so as to create an effective operation that was focused on optimizing the impact of literacy interventions. These participants were aware of the cost of pulling students out of

class and wanted to make sure the time was well spent and focused directly on the specific literacy needs of the students.

In an effort to make these interventions highly impactful, one principal even used grant funds to hire an experienced and knowledgeable employee who used literacy data and teacher input to organize all student interventions, target the right students for the right interventions, and provide PD to individuals who performed interventions. Another principal was in the process of completely redesigning the RTI system in order to organize and maximize literacy interventions by getting the right interventions to the right students. Two of six participants were very knowledgeable about the instruction given in various interventions and understood which interventions targeted various literacy needs and the importance of placing students in the right intervention based on their needs.

### **Family-School Literacy Connections**

Leithwood et al. (2004) includes relationships with parents and the wider community as a “potentially powerful determinant of student learning” (p. 11). Although this was not a theme that came out strongly in the dissertation study of principals’ perception as literacy leaders, I believe it is important to discuss family-school literacy connections as a potential source of needed support for principals.

Principals in this study spoke of events such as Literacy Nights as a means of connecting with families. The district, where many participants worked, played a crucial role in supporting these efforts. However, principals generally expressed a sense of dissatisfaction with either the extent to which family-school literacy connections occurred

or the quality of those connections. Most participants said it was an area that was very important to them and that it needed improvement at their schools, but there was a general lack of clear vision in how to make those improvements. The sentiments expressed by my participants reflects “the well-known and persistent challenges teachers and administrators face in creating authentic relationships with parents for school-improvement purposes” (Seashore et al., 2010, p. 32).

The interviews with the participants suggest that principals might find it productive to receive guidance from districts to create systems that connect schools with families in an ongoing way around literacy. Two principals spoke about the role of the community engagement specialist in making some of the literacy connections with families. In addition to these employees, districts might offer support for this effort by turning their focus on school and public librarians, who could partner with the community engagement specialist to create more cohesive and consistent systems of school outreach to parents.

School librarians are a natural fit for making literacy connections with families. These employees can enlist the support of the public library for events that will create a focus on literacy. It might even be advisable to include school librarians on ILTs in order to make their work more embedded in the school goals, family-school literacy connections being one important school goal.

### **Prominence of Themes**

Because I purposefully allowed for more open-ended responses in the beginning of the interviews with principals, this study captured the themes that were at the forefront



of participants' perceptions about literacy leadership. These themes were curriculum adoption and consistent implementation, data use, distributed leadership, culture of high expectations, and professional development for teachers. Themes that typically did not arise in the beginnings of the interviews were literacy engagement and family-school literacy connections. Participants did not generally place the greatest focus on the latter two aspects of literacy development nor did they talk at the greatest length about these aspects of literacy development. When directly prompted about these themes based on the explicit questions that I asked later in the interview process, participants often spoke about their importance. However, they were not as likely to voluntarily discuss them in initial conversations.

This finding points to a number of possibilities as the underlying reason for participants' focus on certain aspects of literacy leadership over others. My own conjecture as to the reason for the relative emphasis on the aforementioned themes is based on the pressure participants commonly expressed as leaders in high-need schools. Participants expressed feelings of pressure to increase literacy achievement of a student body that was well below grade level at a rapid pace in high-need schools. Based on this pressure, it is possible that these principals saw particular aspects of literacy instruction as yielding higher rates of return on the standardized achievement tests that would measure the degree to which the school had improved academically. Aspects of school literacy development, such as literacy engagement and the extent to which families are integrally involved in the literacy engagement of their children, may have been given less priority based on the fact that these aspects would not directly be measured in the balance

that weighed the success of the school. In the long-term, however, literacy engagement and family-school literacy connections may actually yield the greatest likelihood of children becoming highly functioning literate adults.

In regard to the various components of reading development outlined in Chapter 2, participants focused to a greater extent on the technical skills of reading, such as phonics in the early grades. Less emphasis was placed on comprehension at all levels. Given the numbers of students reading below grade level, it appeared that participants believed there was a need to focus on decoding as the primary tool for reading.

### **Limitations of My Findings**

This study represents only a small sample of principals and is, therefore, not generalizable. About qualitative research studies on educational leadership, Seashore et al. (2010) state, “Many educators and scholars find the descriptions provided by case studies to be interesting and informative. But descriptions of a small number of cases do not yield explanations of leadership effects for a more general population of schools” (p. 6). This is certainly the case with my dissertation study. However, I do hope that it will provide a window into what principals value and pay attention to as literacy leaders. Thick descriptions of principals’ perceptions are one way to begin to understand their conceptions and how they enact those conceptions.

This study used interviews as the primary source of data. This is appropriate for research that seeks to understand the perceptions of individuals as they relate to their world. However, based on participants’ views, reported data may differ substantially from the views of others working within the same context. As leaders at a school site,

principals are often called upon to highlight the strengths at their schools. It was, therefore, important to find ways of gaining trust in order to create a forum through which principals felt they could communicate authentically with the researcher so that they could share failures and vulnerabilities, as well as successes and strengths.

An original intent was to ascertain whether there were differences in accounts between principals in high-performing versus low-performing schools. However, the context of school performance frameworks significantly called into question the validity of current school ratings. During the time of this study, systems of grading schools had recently been developed and were in initial phases of implementation. In both states where the schools were located, many changes had been made to the system. In one state, the achievements tests used to rate schools had changed three times within the last five years. In another state, the rating system had been completely reconstructed three times within a decade. The transitions occurring at the state level with required language arts achievement tests and school rating systems created an inability to reliably ascertain school performance across the trajectory of each participant's tenure at their site or to compare their performance to the past performance of other principals at the same site.

An additional factor that impeded such analysis was the fact that the participants of the study had been at their sites for varying amounts of time. A lack of trajectory for principals who had only been on site for short amounts of time made it impossible to ascertain the extent to which most of the participants had made adequate progress toward the goal of improved student literacy achievement at their school.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The voices of the principals in the study provide valuable insight into what is important to consider in literacy leadership. In order to accurately reflect these voices, I have endeavored to use impeccable qualitative methods throughout the research process. It is my hope that the themes that have come across from principals' accounts will inform future research on this important topic and lead to insights which can directly impact students' literacy development in schools.

The accounts of the principals in this study, their perceptions and enactments, yield a cohesive sense of how principals go about the work of raising literacy achievement at high-need elementary schools. Each of these principals came into a situation that was highly problematic in terms of literacy achievement. They sought to transform the educational environment for students through their leadership. Each participant shared individual struggles but, as I interviewed more principals, their struggles took on common elements. They were on a race to travel a long distance from low-performing to high-performing schools in systems that had spent a great deal of time in slow decline.

Raising achievement in literacy means raising expectations for teachers and envisioning new possibilities for students. Principals sought to challenge and support teachers to more effectively teach literacy, and they guided teachers to use data in order to continually check their work against the reality of student literacy achievement. They also led teams of educational professionals, collaborating with administrators, coaches, teachers, and many others for the end-goal of improved literacy learning for all children.

Their work served to underline the importance of principals as literacy leaders in schools that seek to make big changes in challenging environments.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

### Interview 1 Questions

- What do you perceive is your role in leading literacy at your school?
- How do your actions reflect your perceptions as a literacy leader?

### Interview 2 Questions

- What is your journey in learning about how to lead in literacy (reading, writing, oral language)?
- What is your own journey in regard to literacy?
- What is your journey in learning about how to teach literacy (reading, writing, oral language)?
- How does your understanding of the reading process and other literacy processes influence you as a principal?
- How do you believe your teachers are supported in your school in literacy instruction?
- How comfortable do you feel about the literacy instruction for each of the children in the school?

How do you:

- Assist staff in defining a schoolwide philosophy of literacy learning and instruction?
- Facilitate school/family connections in regard to reading/literacy?
- Motivate students to read?

- Facilitate opportunities for teacher learning and growth in their ability to effectively teach reading?
- Understand and analyze the effectiveness of the literacy curriculum?
- Understand and analyze the effectiveness of the literacy teaching at your school site?
- Use data to understand the literacy progress of students?
- Facilitate bi-literacy of culturally and linguistically diverse learners?
- Incorporate the school library into your literacy efforts?
- Work with other educational personnel to accomplish your goals in literacy learning for students?

## Appendix B: Coding of Cases

**Table 1**

*Code Mapping: Mr. Taylor*

<b>Third Iteration: Concepts</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Context</li> <li>• Participant's Background (Feeling competent/knowledgeable; Whole Language philosophy; Perceptions of lack of expertise; Feeling incompetent; Not feeling knowledgeable; Background; Science of reading)</li> <li>• Role of the Principal (Not my role; Distributed leadership)</li> <li>• Role of the Curriculum (Strategy; Use of curriculum; Supplying resources)</li> <li>• Individual Child (Strategy; Relationships; Love of reading/Values; Supplying resources; Cheerleader; Love of reading; Student engagement; Reading volume; Incentive system; Parent-community relationships)</li> <li>• Centrality of the Teacher (Strategy; Relationships; Teacher feedback; Supplying resources; Using data)</li> <li>• Data Use (Using data; Teacher feedback; Strategy)</li> </ul>	
<b>Second Iteration: Categories</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling competent/knowledgeable</li> <li>• Feeling incompetent</li> <li>• Not feeling knowledgeable</li> <li>• Not my role</li> <li>• Background</li> <li>• Distributed leadership</li> <li>• Teacher support</li> <li>• Strategy</li> <li>• Use of curriculum</li> <li>• Whole Language philosophy</li> <li>• Science of reading</li> <li>• District guidance/support</li> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Using data</li> <li>• Teacher feedback</li> <li>• Love of reading/values</li> <li>• Supplying resources</li> <li>• Student engagement</li> <li>• Reading volume</li> <li>• Incentive system</li> </ul>	

- Cheerleader
- Parent-Community relationships

#### **First Iteration: Codes**

- Use of assessment data
- Moving kids up
- Whole group v. individualized instruction
- Active engagement
- Self-efficacy
- Not competent
- Competent-knowledge
- Not my role
- More reading instruction
- Using curriculum
- Learning from curriculum
- Attending professional development with teachers
- Background
- Distributed leadership
- Teacher support
- Strategy
- District guidance
- District support
- Response to Intervention
- Not instructional expert
- Whole Language
- Diagnostic reading
- Teacher feedback
- Relationships
- Incentives
- Rewards
- Reading volume
- Love of reading
- Values-philosophy
- Enjoyment
- Tutoring
- Bilingual education
- Literacy Nights
- Early literacy
- One-on-one reading
- Student as individual

- Individual child
- Comprehension
- Library
- Bringing in resources
- Student engagement
- Recognizes centrality of teacher
- Reality check
- Parent-Community relationship
- Accountability
- Data misuse
- Skewing data
- Philosophy
- Flooding resources
- Preparation
- Not prepared
- Benefit-strong mentor
- More hands-on
- Working with kids
- Other life experiences
- Professional development
- PD without coaching
- PD should be reflected in classrooms
- Growth mindset
- State legislation
- Compliance
- Data Collector
- Testing
- Principal preparation
- Principal support
- Biliteracy
- Cognitive Coaching
- Teacher Evaluation

**Table 2**

*Code Mapping: Ms. Sanchez*

Code Mapping
Third Iteration: Concepts
• School Context

- Participant's Background (Seeking knowledge; Special education; Philosophy)
- Role of the Principal (Instructional leader; Empowering teachers; Effective strategies; Fidelity to curriculum; Tier 1 instruction; Too many referrals)
- Role of the Curriculum (Curriculum use; Tier 1 instruction; Ineffective instruction; Benefits of curriculum; Foundational skills; Curriculum is not perfect; Other resources; Fidelity to curriculum; Curriculum training; Consistent lesson plan; Emergent bilingual students; Effective strategies)
- Empowering Teachers (Use of curriculum; Tier 1 instruction; Ineffective instruction; Benefits of the curriculum)
- Restructuring Response to Intervention (Tier 1 instruction; Too many referrals; Ineffective instruction; Ineffective Structure; Special education; Universal Design for Learning (UDL); RTI tiers; Redistribution of human resources)
- Data Use (Underlying principles; Data use; District support; Assessment technology)
- Parent-community relationships
- School Library

#### **Second Iteration: Categories**

- Instructional leader
- Seeking knowledge
- Use of curriculum
- Tier 1 instruction
- Too many referrals
- Ineffective instruction
- Ineffective Structure
- Foundational skills
- Benefits of curriculum
- Curriculum is not perfect
- Philosophy
- Special education
- Empowering teachers
- Underlying principles of curricula
- Pulling in other resources
- Fidelity to curriculum
- Curriculum training
- Consistent lesson plan across school
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Effective strategies
- Parent-community relationships
- RTI tiers

- Redistribution of human resources
- Data use
- District support
- Reading assessment technology
- School library

#### **First Iteration: Codes**

- Common Core State Standards
- Instructional leader
- Foundational skills
- Background
- Lacking knowledge
- 1<sup>st</sup> year
- Seeking help
- Getting educated
- Phonics
- Special education
- Reading Recovery
- Professional development
- New curriculum
- Decomposing curriculum
- Backwards planning with curriculum
- Common Core assessments
- Fidelity to curriculum
- Consistency of content delivery
- Curriculum work
- Universal design for learning
- Differentiation
- Too many referrals to special ed.
- Dyslexia designations
- Instruction to blame
- Instructional deficits
- Scattered implementation of curriculum

- Inconsistent delivery of instruction
- Too many in special education
- Misuse of online teaching sites
- Cute activities
- “Sit n’ git” instruction
- Talking about books
- Structured curriculum
- Phonemic Awareness
- Low reading performance
- Foundational skills
- Frontloading vocabulary
- Curriculum teaches teachers
- Curriculum isn’t perfect
- Understanding the curriculum
- Move away from whole language
- Move toward phonics
- More time for struggling readers
- IEP writing
- Using different PD
- Least dangerous assumption
- Empowering teachers
- Principal knowledge of literacy
- Student vocabulary development
- Understanding theory in curriculum
- Curriculum is a tool
- Need a curriculum
- Backwards planning
- Lack of preparation of teachers
- District provides units
- Drawing on reading process theory
- District leaves teachers drowning
- Teacher control of reading strategies
- Changing strategies for struggling readers
- Critical thinking about curriculum fidelity
- Teachers learning
- Teacher support
- Common lesson plan template
- Language/terms of the curriculum
- Principal leads knowledge of curriculum
- Teachers created reading deficits
- Family deficit language of teachers



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locus of control at school</li> <li>• Strong Tier 1 instruction</li> <li>• Defining the tiers of RTI</li> <li>• Appropriate services to kids</li> <li>• Redistribution of resources</li> <li>• Data use</li> <li>• Data teams</li> <li>• Basing decision on data</li> <li>• DIBELS assessment use</li> <li>• Data use just for compliance</li> <li>• Technology use with assessments</li> <li>• Decomposing assessments</li> <li>• District support</li> <li>• Feeling out of date with technology</li> <li>• Too many kids struggling in reading</li> <li>• Kids aren't making progress</li> <li>• Assessment as a tool</li> <li>• PD based on data</li> <li>• Progress monitoring</li> <li>• Data tells a different story</li> <li>• Being in classrooms</li> <li>• Guided reading</li> <li>• Reading-writing connection</li> <li>• Goals/Outcomes for students</li> <li>• Family literacy</li> <li>• Home reading</li> <li>• Joy of reading</li> <li>• Library</li> <li>• English Language Learners</li> <li>• Supplemental resources</li> <li>• Philosophy</li> <li>• Collective responsibility</li> </ul>
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**Table 3**

*Code Mapping: Mr. Li*

Code Mapping
Third Iteration: Concepts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Context</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant's Background</li> <li>• Role of the Principal (Joy of literacy; Literacy environment; Leadership structure)</li> <li>• Leadership structure (Professional development; Building instructional capacity)</li> <li>• Curricular Resources (Curriculum use; Building instructional capacity; Professional development; District support)</li> <li>• Building Instructional Capacity (Professional development; Joy of literacy; District support; Data use)</li> <li>• Literacy Environment (Joy of literacy)</li> </ul>
<b>Second Iteration: Categories</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background</li> <li>• School context</li> <li>• Role of the principal</li> <li>• Leadership structure</li> <li>• Curriculum use</li> <li>• Joy of literacy</li> <li>• Literacy environment</li> <li>• Data use</li> <li>• Building instructional capacity</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• District support</li> </ul>
<b>First Iteration: Codes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background</li> <li>• School context</li> <li>• Redesign</li> <li>• Role of principal</li> <li>• Not an expert</li> <li>• Building strong leadership</li> <li>• Distributed leadership</li> <li>• Previous structure of leadership</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Technical questions about literacy</li> <li>• Philosophical questions about literacy</li> <li>• Culture of literacy</li> <li>• Joy of literacy</li> <li>• Curriculum use</li> <li>• Fidelity to the curriculum</li> <li>• Instruction grounded in standards</li> <li>• Spectrum of curricular implementation</li> <li>• Tighter model of curricular implementation</li> </ul>

- Aligned for a common language
- Unity of practice
- Not scripted
- Strong learning environment
- Systems, routines, and structures
- Guided reading groups
- Two-week ramp-up for routines
- Running records
- Groundwork
- Early literacy
- Reading engagement
- Immersed in books
- Reading/Writing connection
- Not prepared to teach literacy
- Scripted curriculum
- Roll my sleeves up
- Doing it together
- Changes in literacy instruction
- Can't keep up with changes
- Playing catch up
- Stronger grounding in curriculum
- Ability to discern solid instruction
- Critical thinking about curriculum
- Depth of knowledge
- Attending professional development with teachers
- Thought partner
- Taking guided reading groups
- Problem solving
- Instructional leader only one part of job
- One-day session for principals
- Length of time curriculum is used
- Read aloud
- Word recognition
- Common Core
- Listening comprehension
- Small group instruction
- Learning technical aspects of reading
- Self-efficacy
- Struggling readers
- Instructional techniques
- Curriculum use

- District recommended curriculum
- Assessing effectiveness of curriculum
- Phonics
- Curriculum and Common Core
- Curriculum and assessment alignment
- Drowning in resources
- Bloated curriculum
- Too much material for teachers
- Data meetings
- Data use
- Writing samples
- Teachers using data
- Writing exemplars
- Rating writing samples
- Data teams
- Principal facilitation of data meeting
- Re-teaching based on data
- Teachers gaining skills
- Double-loop learning
- Data informs instruction
- District support
- Assessment partner
- Alignment of assessment to curriculum
- Constructed response
- Teacher support
- Focus on literacy
- Integrating literacy across content areas
- High-quality literature
- Technical aspects of literacy
- Developing teachers
- Teacher attrition
- Principal preparation
- New teacher experiences
- Not learning about reading instruction
- Limited time
- Building school level capacity
- Adherence to a curriculum
- Focus on models of curriculum
- Differing principal perspectives
- Need for time and space
- Deep understanding

- District priorities
- Deep learning
- Time to learn curriculum
- Literacy nights
- Family-community engagement
- Library circulation
- Love of reading
- No library
- Classroom libraries

**Table 4**

***Code Mapping: Mr. Correa***

<b>Code Mapping</b>
<b>Third Iteration: Concepts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School context</li> <li>• Background</li> <li>• Role of the principal (Distributed Leadership; Early literacy; Culture of high expectations)</li> <li>• Literacy Leadership Structure (Distributed Leadership; Interventions; Culture of high expectations; Early literacy; Interventions; Culture of high expectations)</li> <li>• Data Use (Data teams; Data points; Guided reading; Accountability; Schedule change; Culture of high expectations; Curriculum use)</li> <li>• Technology Use (Technology use; Love of reading; Reading volume)</li> <li>• Family-School Literacy Connections (Culture of high expectations; Love of reading; Reading volume)</li> </ul>
<b>Second Iteration: Categories</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School context</li> <li>• Background</li> <li>• Role of the principal</li> <li>• Distributed leadership</li> <li>• Technology use</li> <li>• Guided reading</li> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• Data points</li> <li>• Schedule change</li> <li>• Love of reading</li> <li>• Reading volume</li> </ul>

- Early literacy
- Interventions
- School-family literacy connections
- Curriculum use
- Culture of high expectations
- Teacher experience

#### **First Iteration: Codes**

- Not an expert
- Background
- Coaching
- Observing teachers
- Giving teacher feedback
- Pushing to next steps
- Distributed leadership
- Meeting growth percentile
- PARCC assessments
- Incredible growth
- High levels of effectiveness
- Regular observations and feedback cycles
- Debrief feedback
- Co-planning
- Guided reading lesson folder
- Shared lesson at DRA levels
- Banks of lessons
- Principal's role
- Accountability
- Setting goals
- Setting very high expectations
- Access to a highly effective coach
- Supporting teachers
- Moving from tier 3 to tier 2
- Systems in place
- Guided reading as highest level
- Expectations for supporting teachers
- Literacy block
- Many components
- Running records
- Levers for next steps
- Challenge of many data points
- Partnership with assessment company

- Proficiency bands
- Standards mastery
- Meet standards
- Reading level
- Percentage correct answers
- World of accountability
- More rigorous data
- Progress monitor measuring different things
- State perspective
- State legislation
- Grade level books DRA data
- PARCC data
- Differing expectations of data
- Inconsistent assessment measures
- Difference in rigor
- Assessing different skills
- Finding the balance
- Highest lever data points
- Inform instruction
- Build skills
- Compliance perspective
- Report back
- Person-to-person analysis
- DRA leveled books
- Formative assessment
- Assessment as a tool
- Tough juggling act
- Replicating PARCC assessment
- Unlimited time tests
- Worried about data
- Major standards
- Minor standards
- Interim points
- Scope and Sequence
- New assessment partner
- Aligned to PARCC
- Accountability points
- Learn about kids
- Data team meetings
- Computerized assessment system
- Guided reading groups

- Data perspective
- Instructional moves
- Data room
- Objectives
- Facilitating own protocol
- Divide and conquer
- Shared note catcher
- Google drive
- Wonderings
- Schedule changes
- Not stagnating
- A little bit better
- Thought partner
- Kids are very capable
- School context
- Changing demographics
- Opportunity gap
- College and career ready
- Literacy as a gate keeper
- Parents from Mexico
- First to graduate from college
- Outlier
- Not able to spell name
- Strong leader
- Simultaneous bilingual
- Migrant education summer program
- Summer school
- Connections with adults
- Loved to read and write
- Book reports
- Modeling love of reading
- Book app
- Reading technology
- Chrome books
- I-pads
- Assessment online
- Books within range
- Technology monitors reading
- Struggling readers
- Cloze assessments
- Context clues



- Word bank
- Earn digital badges
- Genres
- Lexile levels
- Motivating kids
- Student culture
- Respect, Empathy, Kindness
- Phonics
- Phonological awareness
- Montessori hybrid
- One-to-one correspondence
- Shared reading
- Lexile levels
- Comprehension
- Early literacy
- Small group instruction
- Student interventions
- Instructional services team
- Senior team leads
- Family-school literacy connections
- Parent partner classes
- Literacy nights
- Frustration
- Principal communications with families
- Locus of control
- Turnaround School
- School performance framework
- Curriculum use
- Systems in place
- Piloting curriculum
- Adopting curriculum
- Changing curriculum
- Shift to new curriculum
- Take-home books
- Delivery of instruction
- Supplemental resources
- Curriculum and new teachers
- Skipping parts of lessons
- Sticking to script
- Early exit program
- School library

- Classroom libraries
- Digital library
- English and Spanish books
- Culture of high expectations
- Praising staff
- Recognizing kids
- Celebrating attendance, behavior, academics
- Defining college readiness
- Teacher attrition
- Disparity between schools
- New teachers
- Teacher retention
- Senior team leads

**Table 5*****Code Mapping: Ms. Martinelli***

<b>Code Mapping</b>
<b>Third Iteration: Concepts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Context</li> <li>• Participant's Background (District support; Differences in rapport; Teacher leader; Writing instruction)</li> <li>• Role of the Principal (Differences in rapport; Teacher leader; Writing instruction; Writing exemplars)</li> <li>• Data Reality Check (Data reality check; Not challenging kids; Choices based on data; School-parent connections)</li> <li>• Optimizing Human Resources (Response to Intervention; Optimizing human resources; Biliteracy)</li> <li>• Building Teacher Leadership (District support; Bringing in PD; Teacher leader; Creating leaders)</li> <li>• Curricular Resources (Teacher leader; Curricular resources; Misalignment of standards and resources; Writing instruction; Biliteracy; Writing exemplars)</li> <li>• Raising Expectations for Students (Curricular resources; Data reality check; Not challenging kids; Early literacy; Learning objective process; Choices based on data; Writing instruction; Writing exemplars)</li> <li>• The Whole Child (Not challenging kids; Early literacy; Writing instruction; Self-efficacy of students; School-parent connections)</li> </ul>
<b>Second Iteration: Categories</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District support</li> <li>• Bringing in PD</li> <li>• Differences in rapport</li> <li>• Teacher leader</li> <li>• Curricular resources</li> <li>• Mis-alignment of standards and resources</li> <li>• Response to Intervention</li> <li>• Optimizing human resources</li> <li>• Data reality check</li> <li>• Not challenging kids</li> <li>• Early literacy</li> <li>• Creating leaders</li> <li>• Learning objective process</li> <li>• Choices based on data</li> <li>• Writing instruction</li> <li>• Self-efficacy of students</li> </ul>

- Biliteracy
- Writing exemplars
- School-parent connections

#### **First Iteration: Codes**

- Easier before principalship
- Slower and more challenging
- School leadership
- Inconsistent resources
- Focus on themes not skills
- Not grade appropriate
- Not systematic
- Looks good on paper
- Not really happening
- Taking stock
- No alignment
- Common Core
- No curricular resources
- Starting from scratch
- No progress for struggling readers
- Background
- Interventionist Academy
- Response to Intervention
- District led training
- Collaborative team
- Developed a plan for literacy
- Access to core instruction
- English language development
- Reading intervention
- Strategic scheduling
- Kids on the cusp
- All the teachers
- Teacher rapport
- Trust
- Easier to be a teacher
- Skin in the game
- All want the best for kids
- Viewed as a principal

- Leading reform
- Intervention teacher
- Current school context
- Teachers didn't know the data
- Have gaps
- District Performance Framework
- State Performance Framework
- Colors on framework
- Data charts
- Reality of data
- More fine-grained look at data
- Reality behind data
- Teachers shocked by data
- First day as principal
- Teachers analyze data
- No structure
- Differentiation block
- Funding strategies
- Change funding
- Teachers see from data
- Reliance on paraprofessionals
- District support
- District expectation for reading levels
- No clear feedback
- Professional development
- Guided Reading
- Holding kids back too long
- Improved reading performance
- We are believers now
- Start at kindergarten
- Interventionist ratio too low
- Teacher support
- Teacher leadership
- Use assistant principal
- Leading by Example
- Fall v. prior spring assessments
- Summer slide
- Challenging teachers
- Emotional damage
- Self-efficacy
- Curriculum choices

- Outperforming
- Bilingual education
- Biliteracy
- Hunting for lessons
- Burden lifted
- Adapting curriculum
- Integrity to curriculum
- Thoughtful planning
- Joy of curriculum
- Missing the mark
- Platform of tasks
- No Spanish equivalent
- Data teams
- Consistent tasks
- Tasks aligned to objectives
- Goal-task mismatch
- Scheduling for data teams
- Quality of writing
- Rigor of assessments
- Writing exemplars
- Vertically aligned
- Showing writing exemplars
- School-family connections
- Fixed mindset
- Observing in classrooms
- Gender differences
- Distributed leadership
- Senior team leads
- District vision
- Content area literacy

**Table 6**

*Code Mapping: Mr. Schmidt*

<b>Code Mapping</b>
<b>Third Iteration: Concepts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Context</li> <li>• Participant's Background</li> <li>• Role of the Principal</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture of High Expectations</li> <li>• Curricular Resources</li> <li>• Professional Development</li> <li>• Small Group Focus</li> <li>• Maximizing Human Resources</li> </ul>
<b>Second Iteration: Categories</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School context</li> <li>• Role of principal</li> <li>• Curricular resources</li> <li>• Supporting teachers</li> <li>• Small group instruction</li> <li>• Data use</li> <li>• Raising literacy expectations</li> <li>• School culture</li> <li>• Biliteracy</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Participant background</li> <li>• School structure</li> <li>• Response to intervention</li> <li>• Books to read</li> <li>• Coordinating human resources</li> <li>• District support</li> <li>• Maximizing instructional time</li> <li>• Philosophy of early literacy</li> </ul>
<b>First Iteration: Codes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy central to vision</li> <li>• School context</li> <li>• Planning year</li> <li>• Transition year</li> <li>• Acting principal</li> <li>• Turnaround school</li> <li>• Repairing culture</li> <li>• Moving the needle instructionally</li> <li>• Solid curricular resources</li> <li>• Teacher support</li> <li>• Lesson planning</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Small group instruction</li> <li>• Data processes</li> <li>• Pervasive gaps</li> <li>• Challenging conversations</li> </ul>

- Early literacy
- Developmentally appropriate
- Work on culture
- English Language Learners
- Language allocation guidelines
- Strengths in native language
- Biliteracy
- Bilingual education
- Federal mandate
- No longer dual language
- Monitoring student language levels
- New English Language Learners
- Curriculum use
- Adoption of new curriculum
- Curricular consolidation for ELLs
- Transdisciplinary curriculum
- Scripted curriculum
- Giving teachers a resource
- District Professional Development
- Fidelity to curriculum
- Develop ability to adjust
- Giving resources
- Overloaded teachers
- Moving the instructional needle
- Direction of school
- School redesign
- Need for curriculum
- Mountain of information
- Background
- Reader's/Writer's Workshop
- Whole language
- Body of evidence
- District guidance
- Data room
- Proficiency bands
- Data team meetings
- Data processes
- Reteach
- Response to Intervention
- Different data meetings
- Student interventions



- Building capacity
- Running records
- Guided reading groups
- Triangulated data
- Redesign plan
- Doing everything
- Distributed leadership
- Dean of instruction
- Intervention-extension coordinator
- Extra Hands on deck
- Inefficient use of interventions
- Coordinating interventions
- Paraprofessionals
- Senior team leads
- Smaller case loads
- Co-observations
- Instructional leadership team
- Aligned to expertise
- Pushing each other
- School-embedded PD
- Habits of discussion
- Facilitating student talk
- Developing language
- Empowering students
- RTI meetings
- Monitoring
- Making progress
- Skill-focus data meetings
- Data displays
- Teaching-learning cycle
- Data points
- Data-driven culture
- Date-focused culture
- Sense of urgency
- Teacher attrition
- Rooky teachers
- School library
- Engaging titles
- Classroom libraries
- Technology
- Reading during break

- Acquiring grants
- Facilitate and manage extended day
- Power hour
- Connect to school day
- Teacher voice
- Ongoing coaching for tutors
- Data-driven intervention
- Avoiding siloed work
- Alignment of interventions
- Give feedback to tutors
- Touch point
- Working with paraprofessionals
- Prioritizing struggling readers
- Early literacy
- Targeting struggling readers
- Student interventions
- One-on-one tutoring
- District support
- Literacy rotations
- Efficient use of time
- Well-oiled machine
- Efficient use of tutors
- Early childhood education
- Philosophical difference
- Widening gap
- Lack of exposure
- Play versus academics
- Intentional vocabulary
- Developmental appropriateness
- Prerequisite skills
- Emergent literacy
- District influence
- Conversationally rich environment
- Families
- Not talking to kids
- Oral language development
- Not an ECE expert
- Self-efficacy
- Co-observations
- Doing kids a disservice